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UZBEKISTAN SPEAKS

Short Stories



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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY G. H A N N A A N D D. S K V I R S K Y

DESIGNED BY Y. R A K U Z I N

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**Two Chapters from
NAVAI**

by Aibek

Chapter Two

I

Astonished, Sultan Murad stopped short as he was entering the room of Fasih ad-Din, teacher at the madrasah. His teacher had put on a new silk robe and was carefully binding a turban round a new skullcap. His frank, open face, with its splendid beard, usually of gentle aspect, betrayed pleasurable excitement, as, indeed, did his whole figure. Sultan Murad guessed that Fasih ad-Din was about to visit some aristocratic house.

When he had finished binding on his turban the teacher smoothed out the wrinkles in his robe and turned to Sultan Murad with a smile.

"There will be no lesson today," he said. "My lord Alisher Navai has been appointed Keeper of the Seal of His Majesty the Sultan. In his youth Alisher Sahib took lessons from me for some time. It is our duty to congratu-

late him on his appointment to so high a post."

Sultan Murad had heard people say that Alisher was an old friend of the Sultan's but he did not expect him to be given such an important post in such a short time. The young man knew that Navai was a gifted poet from verses of his that had been passed round from hand to hand; and from many people he had heard of him as a man and a scholar, especially in more recent times he had heard unusually interesting, even amazing things about him. The news that a man of this type had been given a high appointment at court gave Sultan Murad sincere pleasure.

"You, my teacher, are also to be congratulated if my lord Alisher once bathed in the light of your learning," said Sultan Murad with respect.

Fasih ad-Din's eyes beamed with pleasure.

"Your unworthy disciple," continued Sultan Murad, "would like to make known to you his one heartfelt wish."

"What is that wish?" asked Fasih ad-Din, glancing at him.

"My wish is to follow you like your shadow to the chambers of the great poet," answered Sultan Murad.

Fasih ad-Din did not answer immediately but stood with his eyes fixed on the ground.

He was very fond of his talented pupil and was always praising his knowledge and industry. But the youth was the cause of considerable worry: in order to give Sultan Murad a two-hour lesson he sometimes had to read at home for weeks. He raised his eyes and looked at Sultan Murad with a smile.

"The time has come for you to meet all the great people of Khorasan. Very well, you may accompany me."

Teacher and pupil left the madrasah together.

Alisher's house was in a holiday mood. The servants took the honoured teacher and his quite unknown pupil into a big room in the front part of the house. The room was spread with bright red carpets, and the ceilings, walls and shelves were painted and decorated with a floral plaster ornament. There were several people in the room already and Fasih ad-Din was given a seat of honour. Sultan Murad knelt down by the door. He knew most of the guests—they were well-known representatives of all branches of knowledge and the best poets of Herat; a few higher court officials dressed in rich robes sat proudly amongst them.

Alisher was not in the room, he had not returned from the palace. Sultan Murad sat

in silence, listened to the hushed conversation and out of respect for the assembled company did not offer any comment. Some time later it was announced that the poet had arrived. Sultan Murad immediately went out to the verandah. Most of the guests, Fasih ad-Din amongst them, also went out. Sultan Murad immediately recognized the poet amongst the haughty courtiers in their gold-embroidered robes, recognized him as though he had seen him before. Alisher was wearing a high turban carefully and tastefully bound round a conical blue cap. A silk robe of rather sombre colours was thrown over his shoulders and over it a simple coat of grey cloth.

Navai was a man of about thirty. He was of more than average height, slim but strong; his short black beard and moustache were carefully trimmed. There was the noble impress of great spiritual strength on his broad face with its somewhat prominent cheekbones. Profound thought, will power and reverie were reflected in his slant eyes under slightly swollen lids.

Navai, smiling with his eyes and the corners of his lips, greeted each of his guests in turn. Fasih ad-Din greeted the poet and offered his sincere congratulations and then, in some agitation, introduced Sultan Murad. The latter, pale from confusion, approached Ali-

sher. He bowed low, pressed the poet's hand and immediately took a step back.

"The pupil of your humble servant," said Fasih ad-Din with pride. "A youth of rare ability. I have no doubt that he is the coming Abu Ali ibn Sina* of our days."

"My honoured teacher is praising his unworthy pupil beyond all measure," murmured Sultan Murad, folding his hands respectfully on his breast.

Navai turned to the youth with a friendly smile, asked him where he had been born and what subjects he had studied. Sultan Murad modestly but with dignity named him those branches of knowledge with which he was already well acquainted. Those who gathered round them and who knew Sultan Murad deemed it their duty to say something in praise of him.

"Always be diligent and painstaking," said the pleased Navai. "The country needs men like you. As we nurture the tree of knowledge we must strengthen its roots in our native soil in order to gather fruits from it in abundance. I hope you will be a frequent visitor."

"From the bottom of my heart I thank you for your attention to my unworthy self," said

* Avicenna.

Sultan Murad in a trembling voice. "I cannot imagine any greater good fortune than that of drawing from the ocean of your knowledge!"

Navai led Sultan Murad into the room. He indicated a place of honour to the youth, who excused himself however and sat in a lower place.

He could read the perplexity and the unspoken question in the eyes of those present: "Why pay so much attention to a poor young student in a coarse robe?"

Either from modesty or because he was the host, the poet and Keeper of the Seal sat lower than anybody else. He spoke about conditions in the Herat madrasahs; about the life of students and teachers and, at the same time, listened attentively to what others had to say. Then he asked detailed questions about scholarly works, great and small, and about the poetry that had been written in Khorasan during recent years. Even when the others were talking about the rubaiyat, poems or charades of some nameless poet, Navai asked for full information about them. The faces of those present brightened, the conversation became more lively.

Sultan Murad did not for a moment take his eyes off Navai as though he feared that he might never again have the good fortune

to see him. Navai's whole appearance, in addition to his modesty, was one of majestic pride, free from haughtiness and self-importance; the motions of his hands were elegant, his smile and his voice charmed those around him with their tenderness.

The servants spread the *dastarkhan*.* The guests were offered sweetmeats, pistachios, almonds and dried fruits in huge quantities. After these soup in beautiful porcelain bowls, meat on dishes and soft cakes were brought in.

After the meal the eldest of those present said a prayer, wished the poet good fortune and the entire company took leave of him.

II

The flames of the candles on the shelf and the moonbeams falling through the open door mingled with the pattern of the carpets, drawing soft, fantastic pictures; from time to time the flames would flicker in a breath of wind and the leaves of a big book, lying open on a low bench, would rustle; the poet was resting, playing on his lute and giving himself up entirely to the charms of song. Navai did not keep music and verse apart, he knew and loved the art of producing beautiful melodies.

* *Dastarkhan*: a cloth spread on the carpet like a table-cloth.

With a faint sigh Navai leaned the instrument against the shelf and removed the plectrum from his finger. He sat down at the window. The only sound that came from outside was the rustling of the trees as they played in the wind. The poet was wrapped in thought. Here he was again in Herat, in his own home. Perhaps he would never again have to leave his beloved city and the house in which he was born. Here everything was familiar, was near and dear to him; the loving kindness of his deceased parents was imprinted on all the things. Had not Ghiyas ad-Din Kichkina fondled him in this very place, beside that very door? When he had been four years old—Navai remembered it very vaguely—he had recited the poems of Kasim i Anwar quite clearly and how pleased his father had been! And his late mother? The mothers of his companions had been unable to compare with her in gentleness and love. She was a simple woman who was heart and soul in her children and who was always good to relatives and neighbours. When he was five or six years old he would come running home from school and she would embrace him and give him milk, unleavened cakes and sweets and would be glad that the boy had done well at the lessons given him by his honoured

teacher; in her dreams she already saw her son a great scholar.

Memories flashed before him in a constant stream . . . the flight of the entire family to Iraq during the political disturbances in Khorasan following on the death of Shahruh, when his parents had been afraid for their lives; the hardships of the journey; the pleasures and amusements of the road, the meeting with Sharah ad-Din Yezdi, author of the famous *Zafar-namah*.

All his life long he would remember the journey back and how he fell asleep on horseback and fell off. When he awoke next morning he saw that he was lying alone on the empty plain. He caught his obedient horse that was wandering about nibbling grass not far away, mounted with difficulty and, tormented by thirst, spent a long time looking for the caravan in that hot desert. His parents, half-dead with grief were overjoyed when Alisher was, at last, found.

He went to school together with Husein Baikara, when he was eight or nine years old he read Ferid ad-Din Attar's *Bird Talk* and, wrapped up in its puzzling, exciting ideas, gradually forgot play and amusements, sleep and even food. The worried parents took the book away from Alisher and hid it, they forbade him to read it. But the lad had learned

the book by heart and continued repeating its lines over and over again to himself....

Such amazing memories, some sweet, some bitter, passed through the poet's mind. He experienced once more the first torments and pleasurable excitement of creative writing. The admiration the fond father showed for his poet son, the unanimous praise and encouragement of the leading poets, the choice, after much thought, of the pseudonyms Navai and Fani for the poet, the meeting with the aged Lutfi and his unexpectedly great appreciation—were these things that could be forgotten?

The years of wandering in foreign lands.... His eight years of life in Meshhed, poring over books in the dilapidated, cold and overcrowded cells of the madrasah, where no single ray of sunlight penetrated by day and where he could not close his eyes at night....

His acquaintance, through their books, with the ancient philosophers, scholars and poets who had lived hundreds and thousands of years before.... His teachers, his fellow students, the great people, the hundreds of scholars whom he had had the good fortune to talk to, right up to his very last teacher, Khoja Fazullah Abu'l-Leisi of Samarkand—the poet recalled them all, talked with them again in his thoughts....

Footsteps resounded in the courtyard. The poet raised his head. The door opened with a squeak and his younger brother, Dervish Ali, asked permission and then entered the room. He was an educated man who differed greatly from his brother in character: he was careless and foolish and lived a thoughtless sort of life.

Navai glanced at his swollen, tearing eyes and smiled mockingly.

"What is the news from the city, brother?"

"Apart from the dissension between the Shiites and Sunnites there has been nothing of importance," answered Dervish Ali, unhurriedly seating himself. "The Sunnites are everywhere grumbling: 'The Sultan is a Shi-ite, the ishans are Shiites—how much longer can we tolerate this?'"

"It is a pity that these senseless squabbles should arise over a decree of the Sultan's," said Navai, shaking his head in displeasure. "Is there nothing better to do than sow discord amongst people? What is the condition of the state treasury, what is the state of the army, how do madrasah students and the teachers and scholars live, how do officials in the city and in the provinces treat the people; how does the peasant live on his farm, how does the artisan work? These are questions that should be examined through the eye

of the intellect and should be settled wisely and justly. You should be above petty religious squabbles, brother."

Dervish Ali listened attentively, slowly nodding his bowed head. He had a profound respect for his brother and his ideas.

"I hope those religious squabbles do not increase," said Dervish Ali, at last.

"Then let us try to prevent such dissension," said Navai firmly. "We must not show preference for any one religious doctrine. Brother, there is no pleasanter occupation in this world than just reading books, contemplating and writing verses. By nature I am intended for just such a life. I should like to live in some quiet place and float lazily on the sea of enjoyment but, as you know, I have been given a court appointment. I accepted it for the sake of the people and the country. There is an endless number of things to be done in this land and the people have awaited each one of them for centuries. Amongst other things I dream of building a library. You are at present in charge of the state book repository and so that question is your direct concern."

"I will serve you like a slave in everything you do," said Dervish Ali, folding his hands on his breast.

"We will build a book repository such as

the world has never seen," continued Navai enthusiastically. "All the pearls of human thought that have been recorded in books from the earliest times to the present day will grace our library. I, the unworthy one, sincerely desire that all scholars, educated people and poets in Herat and other Islamic countries should make use of the books of that treasure house. Let the Socrates, Platos and Aristotles of philosophy, the Pythagorases of mathematics, the Ulugbegs of astronomy, the Firdausis and Nizamis of poetry work here in peace, each in his own sphere. Let them create fresh treasures of human thought, let them labour that science may flourish. If the light of the truths they discover illumine the sky over our country, if our people are able to benefit by them, then my aim will have been achieved. Dervish Ali, your heart should be filled with love for your people every hour of your life. Whatever you undertake, let the measure of its worth be its usefulness and value for the people...."

"That, of course, is as it should be," said Dervish Ali, stroking his thin beard. "Service to the people enhances the prestige of a man...."

Navai looked expressively at his brother.

"It is a great reward in itself if one leaves behind him the fame of good deeds," he an-

swered briefly. "May the heavens of your enthusiasm never become clouded, my brother!"

Dervish Ali lowered his eyes and turned the conversation back to the library. Alisher glanced at the candle standing on a shelf and was about to get up when Dervish Ali, with a shout of: "I . . . I . . ." jumped swiftly to his feet, took the candle, placed it in the middle of the room and snuffed it with scissors. The poet took a sheet of paper and placed it on the open book. Dipping his pen into the brass inkwell he began slowly and carefully tracing lines on the paper. Dervish Ali watched his brother's shapely hand make a graceful movement and then stop. The paper was soon covered with strange lines. At last Navai laid down the pen and looked up at Dervish Ali.

"Look carefully at this drawing," he said, offering the paper to his brother. "We are not greatly skilled in the art of building. This is a realm in which an adept will have his word to say. But the building we have planned in our minds should look something like this."

The drawing represented a building in plan. Dervish Ali looked at it with interest. A magnificent building seemed to arise before his eyes in all its detail: in answer to his brother's question, Navai described the interior planning and the outside appearance, down to frescoes and the colours to be used.

Alisher then spoke with Dervish Ali about the selection of the books; he was concerned with the copying of the manuscripts of valuable works and asked about the best scribes and bookbinders in Herat.

When the cocks of Herat broke the silence of the night a second time, Dervish Ali, whose eyes could no longer remain open, went to his own room. The poet felt wide awake and at ease. For some time he sat staring dreamily straight ahead, entranced by the soft calm of the night; then he took a clean sheet of paper and sat thinking, pen in hand. Words threaded themselves on the golden thread of his thoughts, rhymes came swiftly, one beckoning another. The pen hurried over the smooth surface of the paper:

*For years I harkened to the words of sheikhs
and nothing gained;
My heart was sad, my head grew dull, my
senses waned.
But oh, for the juice of the grape thou off'r-
est, gentle lad;
One cup's enough to warm my veins—'tis
Eden's charm regained.*

As the poet read the rubai over to himself his face was lit up by a smile. He dried the ink, placed the paper in a gold-embossed

leather cover and began turning the pages of the thick Arabic book....

When Alisher went out into the yard at daybreak a groom was already standing there holding a small, well-fed, gentle roan horse by the bridle. As the poet put his foot into the stirrup the horse moved slowly forward.

It was market day and the streets were full of people. There were peasants riding on horses and donkeys, strings of camels with their bells tinkling, old women with baskets of spun yarn on their heads, weavers with their wares under their arms—all this motley crowd was streaming to the bazaar.

The poet passed through Hiyaban Street and rode up to the huge gates of the Bagh i Zaghan. Soldiers of the guard greeted the Keeper of the Seal and took his horse by the bridle. Alisher dismounted without their assistance.

The poet entered the gates of the huge park with its numerous luxurious palaces, pavilions and wonderful avenues. The wide path between the trees, along which he walked, was speckled with patches of sunlight; he soon reached a large flower garden occupying several acres. It seemed to him that flowers from the whole world had been assembled here. Following his daily custom Alisher paused to

admire the flowers; then he made his way towards a house opposite the flower garden whose walls and doors had been decorated by an artist. He opened a carved door and entered a small luxuriously furnished room. Here the poet met his friend Khoja Afzal. The latter was a man of short stature with vivacious eyes and pleasant manners; he was almost the same age as Alisher. Khoja Afzal, a man of considerable experience in the keeping of accounts and records, was a sober-minded and conscientious official, skilled in the ways of management.

"I am happy to welcome you! Please be seated!" Khoja Afzal rose to his feet and offered Alisher a place. "There is nobody in the divan at present. It is probable that His Majesty the Sultan has not yet left his harem."

Navai enquired about his friend's personal affairs and then the conversation, as usual, turned to general matters affecting the state and the people. Navai spoke of the just rule that should be established, of the relations between the ruler and the people and the people and the ruler; he said that those in power, from the *begs* and *wazirs* down to the lowest official, should in all cases be responsible to the law; he also spoke of the measures that were needed to improve the life of the people.

Khoja Afzal all the time approved of what the poet said and expressed a desire to see his good intention put into effect.

"We must bring about a way of life in Khorasan that will be an example to other nations," said Alisher enthusiastically. "How long are people to live in the wilderness of barbarity? The word 'man' is a lofty word, a great word! Man must live a noble, pure and beautiful life. If the people in power make reason and justice their motto, if they begin to show solicitude for the people, then the rust of life will turn to gold."

"A superb thought and a superb objective!" exclaimed Khoja Afzal. "But in our country violence and the oppression of the people by those in power have been the custom for centuries. That is our great misfortune."

"The sword of violence must be broken," said Navai with determination. "It is criminal to live in peace with oppressors. If we cannot break that sword ourselves we must appeal to the Sultan, we must appeal to his sense of justice."

A servant entered and informed Navai that the Sultan had asked for him. The poet left the house and went to a palace with forty marble columns that stood away to the right. Leaving his street shoes in an anteroom dec-

orated with coloured porcelain, Navai opened a gilded door and entered.

The walls and ceiling of the huge, bright room with windows opening on to a beautiful garden, gleamed with silver and gold. The brilliantly coloured floral ornaments, a real work of art, charmed the eye with their vivid but harmonious colours. Silk carpets spread on the floor were like flower-filled glades. Golden lamps hung down from the high ceiling, there were wonderful Chinese vases on the shelves and in the niches.

At the far end of the room Husein Baikara was seated on his throne. He was stockily built, with wide shoulders and a deep chest. His big slant eyes reflected not only great will power but also his inconstant, lively and jovial character. On his head he wore a Persian lamb cap strung with big pearls, and from his shoulders hung a red brocade robe the collar of which was embroidered in gold and brightly sparkling precious stones. On his wide belt flamed gold embroidery, big pearls and priceless rubies and sapphires from Badakhshan.

Navai bowed three times, asked and received permission to sit down. In the manner of a man constantly in the company of the Sultan, Navai inquired about his health in casual tones. At all meetings with the poet,

Husein Baikara tried to behave as an old friend. He asked Navai's opinion on the appointment of governors to some of the provinces and districts and on the question of his relations with Sultan Mahmud, son of Abu Sa'id Mirza. Navai gave expression to the idea that the people appointed to all posts—from governor down to the city watchmen—should be those who think only of the welfare of the state, they should be just men, interested in the well-being of the people. Friendly relations should be established with Sultan Mahmud but if he should not be satisfied with Mawarannahr and should unsheathe the sword and give rise to trouble in order to seize Khorasan he should be dealt with ruthlessly.

Husein Baikara raised no objections to that.

"Do you know Majd ad-Din Muhammed?" he asked suddenly after a short pause.

"I know him," answered Navai, "but I do not know what sort of man he is."

"He is an extremely clever man," said Husein Baikara. "He serves Kichik Mirza faithfully. His loyalty and zeal are very great. I am envious and the idea came to me that perhaps I should promote him to the post of secretary."

"If his loyalty is sincere," said Navai, doubtfully, "and if Your Majesty has tested

him, then it would be unfitting for your humble servant to raise objections."

Husein Baikara pushed his hand under a soft leather cushion, pulled out a folded sheet of paper and offered it to the poet with a smile. Navai unfolded the expensive paper, soft as silk, and smiled back at the Sultan. It was a *ghazal* written by Husein himself.

Husein Baikara had been fond of poetry from childhood. While they were still at school he and Navai had read the Persian and Turkic poets, talked a lot about poetry and learned whole poems and *ghazals* by heart. As a youth, however, he had paid little attention to poetry, only writing an occasional *ghazal*, probably because his thoughts and dreams as a future ruler were turned towards the winning of power and the throne.

Navai first read the *ghazal* through to himself and then, in a loud voice, recited it beautifully. Like other *ghazals* by Husein it was a poem of love, smooth-flowing and musical. Navai gave special praise to the lines:

*If the cyprus trunk be curved then burn it
down,
And scutter wide the rose that is full blown:
For what are rose and cyprus without thee,
My rose-cheeked cyprus, my one and only
queen!*

As he recited the lines Navai noted in them the originality of thought, image and colour typical of the poet.

"How rich and flexible our language is!" he said heatedly, as though arguing with somebody. "The words of our language can express any thought, any emotion! How easily it allows us to string the pearls of thought on the threads of verse! What would our Persian rhetoricians and our lovers of the Persian language dare to say after reading such *ghazals*?!"

"When the lion of poetry* himself defends that language who would be bold enough to claim the opposite?" laughed Husein Baikara. "Your incomparable poems have shown lovers of literature your own strength and the beauty of our language. Do you remember the passion with which you tried to draw my attention to our language in the days of our youth? It was then that you imbued me with love for our native tongue, a love that I now carry in my heart."

Navai listened to him with his head modestly bowed. Husein Baikara said that he intended giving the verses to several poets for

* A pun on the name Alisher. Sher means lion in Persian.

analysis and asking them to write "responses" to it.

"Suppose a hundred poets analyse your *ghazal* and take up their pens," said Navai laughing, "then there will be a hundred *ghazals*. A hundred buds will burst into flower on one bush."

The *ishik-agma** announced that the "pillars of the state" had arrived. Husein Baikara gave them permission to enter. The *begs*, *wazirs*, higher court officials and regular advisers and companions of the ruler entered the room dressed in rich brocades and Chinese silk. Each of them sat down in his usual place.

Muzaffar Barlas, "the prince of princes," took the highest place, nearest the ruler. When Husein Baikara in his struggle for power had contested the crown and throne against his rivals this prince had followed him over mountains and plains and had rendered him great service. For this reason his pride knew no limits. He behaved as though he were the co-ruler of the state.

Most of those considered pillars of the state were known to the people for their peculiarities and eccentricities. Muhammed Burundug

* *Ishik-agma*, one of the highest offices at the court of the Timurids, a person close to the ruler.

Barlas, member of an ancient princely family, was a clever and competent general. But he was so fond of hunting and falconry that if one of his falcons should die the prince would mourn him with full honours and say: "Why did not my son die instead!"

Zunnun Arghun was a strange man but an excellent swordsman and fighter. He was a constant chess player. Islim Barlas was a simple and bold man, an expert in hunting and falconry. Exerting his great strength to draw a bow that had been specially made for him, he would send an arrow through a thick board. Moghol-beg was an inveterate gambler; Badr ad-Din was a skilled jumper who could jump over seven horses standing in a row. Sa'id Badr was famous for his easy and elegant movements—he was a wonderful dancer and had himself invented new dances. Khoja Abdullah Mervarid knew something of all the sciences; he played beautifully on the *gijaq*, composed poetry and wrote a beautiful hand; he showed great care and taste in selecting verses for an anthology but was at the same time a great drunkard and libertine.

Husein Baikara, the lover of ceremony and splendour, glanced proudly at the motley crowd seated sedately and respectfully before him. He talked with the *begs* for a little time

about the army, inquired of the wazirs of the news arriving from the provinces and asked the Sheikh ul-Islam, the Commander of the Faithful, how to interpret some question concerning the Sharia. The law-giver spoke impressively, dragging out his words. The Sultan seemed to be paying attention but it could be felt that his patience was giving out. When the Sheikh had at last finished Husein Baikara began to speak of hunting and hunting birds. Islim Barlas immediately brightened up. Leaning his huge body towards the Sultan and stroking his stiff moustache with his huge hands he began telling interesting tales about the habits and behaviour of falcons. Muhammed Burundug Barlas also took part in the conversation. The Sultan listened at times with a smile and at others with a serious mien. In the end Husein Baikara ordered Islim Barlas to make the necessary preparations for a big and lengthy hunt and entrusted to him everything connected with it; with a wave of his hand he ended the audience.

All those present were invited to the royal table. Bowing they rose from their places as Husein Baikara proceeded slowly to the next room.

Chapter Nine

I

The long-awaited snow fell after a light frost covering trees and roofs with a white blanket and had lain for two days. Preparations were being made in the Sultan's palace for winter receptions with the pleasures and amusements peculiar to the season.

Navai, following a custom that existed amongst the aristocracy of Herat, wrote a "snow letter" to one of his friends in which he drew a picture of winter in poetry, depicting in vivid colours the emotions that the winter landscape aroused in his heart.

[illegible]

One of Navai's friends invited him to his house on the occasion of the first snowfall. But Navai was wrapped up in his work and had even forgotten a friendship that was as warming and delightful as good, heady wine. The poet did not leave moments that were free from his state duties idle, but either read or wrote, practised calligraphic script or tried to compose new melodies. At times he even tried drawing in an effort to express his thoughts in colours. Contemplation, books and music were his constant occupation. He loved to repeat the saying: "An hour of contemplation is worth more than a year of piety."

The windows were tightly closed. In the centre of the room, furnished with refined taste and a sort of inner harmony, stood a *mangal*, a brazier filled with glowing red coals. The rays of the winter sun played on the panes of coloured glass set in the upper part of the windows. Navai was seated near the *mangal*, a book on his knees and a sheet of coloured paper on the book. His head, in its conical skull-cap, was inclined slightly forward as he wrote easily with his reed pen.

The torment accompanying the creative process in art has been likened to the pangs accompanying birth. When the torment of creation filled Navai's heart, the suffering

was exquisite and gave him the greatest pleasure; like a mother's lullaby it comforted him, like the sun's rays it gave him life and happiness—and he wrote easily, sincerely, with joyful enthusiasm. He was a true magician with words. With amazing brilliance he could embody in words the slightest transient thought, the faintest shade of spiritual emotion or the agitation of the heart; in a drop of water he depicted the restless ocean, in a spark, the light of many stars and out of everyday life he could create profound and noble legends. He was a poet who had mastered the culture of a thousand years, the treasures of many centuries. The genius of his poetry had its roots deep in the art of the Arabs, Persians and Turks and flourished, nurtured by their undying strength.

Navai knew tens of thousands of verses. At the age of four he had recited many poems by heart and at the age of nine he was reading scholarly works on philosophy; as a child he entered into discussions with experienced poets on the art of prosody.

His pen ran smoothly over the paper. The words were freely strung on the golden thread of verse. They ran into lines and, iridescent as pearls, they flashed with ever new colours. The poet was pleased with the simple, pure beauty of his verses. They soon

filled the page, a fresh bouquet of flowers in his native tongue. He laid aside his pen and read to himself.

*If thou hadst not into this world thy wondrous beauty brought,
If thou hadst not into this world a riot of passion brought,
If I had never gazed upon thy countenance so bright
Love's flames would not consume my soul,
torment me day and night.
How cruel thou wast to sear my soul and fill it with such pain,
If wouldst thou but forget my face and ne'er seek me again!
Deceiver! Hadst thou never been so tender and sweet to me
I would not thirst for thy caresses, weary though I be!
Thy love for me was ever false, though I believed it true,
To ice thou turn'dst when thou hadst pierced my fond heart through and through!
If I had only known thee false when first thou camest to me
And had thee scorned e'er all the world had taughed and jeered at me!
But I am mad, I languish still, in all the world alone.*

*And if my passion means my end then let
that end be soon,
But plainst enough, Navai! Deceived by a
maid art thou,
And all thy "ifs" will never touch a heart
that's made of stone.*

The poet placed the *ghazal* between the pages of the book. He gave a sigh of relief, stood up and placed the inkwell on the shelf. His eyes came to rest on an ivory casket of Chinese workmanship. Navai was a lover of beautiful things. "There are many fine craftsmen in Khorasan," he thought, "workers in all the crafts. There are many capable and industrious people amongst them. Why can't we make, for example, Chinese porcelain, Chinese silk or Cashmere shawls in Herat? The crafts must be developed and those people must be encouraged who can bring their craft up to the level of art."

Navai recalled the amazing articles he had recently seen at the craftsmen's festival, things made by Herat workers. He was convinced that many rarities brought from foreign lands could easily be made there in Herat.

Navai shivered. He sat down by the *man-gal* and stirred the coals, already covered with a coating of white ash, with a brass

poker. Then he folded his arms and again sank into the dreams of a poet. "An hour of contemplation is worth more than a year of piety." He wanted to write big poems that would be specimens of the strength and beauty of his native language. His thoughts were wandering in the pleasant gardens of ancient legend. Why were the golden gates of these gardens closed to his people? Were his people more backwards than the Arabs or Persians? No! He must create a blossoming garden of poetic flowers for his contemporaries, one that would never fade.

The door opened slowly and Sheikh Bahlul, who had recently entered the poet's service, came into the room. He was a modest, bashful youth of good manners who had had some schooling. He had a very high opinion of his master whom he considered it an honour to serve.

"Come in. What do you want?" asked Navai, somewhat distraught.

"His Majesty the Sultan requests your presence in the House of Amusement," answered Sheikh Bahlul.

For a moment Navai sat with bowed head and then answered in a voice expressing dissatisfaction.

"Tell him I'll come soon."

Sheikh Bahlul nodded his head and with-

drew. The poet threw a light coat trimmed with beaver skin over his silk robe. In the street, at the gates of his house, he mounted his horse and set out for the palace.

The palace servants welcomed Navai to the House of Amusement with their usual courtesy.

The poet went upstairs. On the landing four doors led into four rooms, one on each side of the landing and between them was a large hall whose walls were decorated with battle and hunting scenes. Husein Baikara received Navai in that hall. After the usual obeisance Navai inquired after the Sultan's health and, as he sat down, turned his eyes to the mural paintings. He looked attentively at the heroes on rearing chargers who were shooting with their bows or, defending themselves with their shields, were waving their swords over the heads of their enemies. The faces of the heroes lacked life and movement, they had an unnatural look about them.

Husein Baikara began complaining about certain governors of his country. Navai took advantage of the moment and told the Sultan some of his observations and his own ideas concerning affairs of state. He spoke of the necessity of paying greater attention to farming and the crafts that would ensure

prosperity to the country; he laid special stress on the necessity of patronage for the scholars, poets, artists and musicians.

"Your Majesty should always be informed of what is going on in the capital and in all regions of the country, and should keep a sharp eye on the activities of the officials," said Navai.

Husein Baikara listened attentively to the poet. Then, pushing his big, fur-topped cap back off his forehead, he announced with a smile that he had invited the poet for a special purpose: to offer Alisher the post of emir in his divan.

The proposal disturbed Navai.

"Again you are raising that difficult question," he said, "although you are fully aware that your humble servant will raise objections."

Husein Baikara frowned.

"We have pondered over those objections and found that your arguments are unfounded. Our heart will know no peace until we have appointed to the post of emir a man who is without equal in our country. If Allah will it our decision will bear good fruit."

"I thank you for the great honour but, if possible, I ask you to free me from any kind of official post," said Navai decisively. "It is a great honour to be emir and place my

seal on the decisions of the divan, but my heart leans more towards freedom. I should like to serve the state and the people with a pure heart. Perhaps my objections have no sense but if they are given thought I am sure they will be understood. If I take the post of emir many men of note will be offended. The soul of man is not without its weaknesses. Unnecessary talk will be the consequence. Hypocrisy will take the place of friendship."

Husein Baikara waved his hand as a sign that the matter was settled.

"If we want anything then no objections can be sanctioned," he said, smiling. "We have given orders that no emir is to sit higher than you in the divan. As far as the seals are concerned, well, with your permission Muzaffar Barlas, and he alone, will place his seal higher than yours. It is now only for the stars to decide. As soon as the astrologers appoint a favourable hour you will affix your first seal."

Navai tried to raise fresh objections and offer fresh excuses but Husein Baikara would not listen to any of them. In the end Navai had to thank the Sultan for his unasked-for kindness.

Husein Baikara invited him to the evening banquet. The poet went downstairs to the

lower rooms of the House of Amusement. In one of the rooms Navai's friends were assembled—Pahlawan Muhammed Sa'id, Wazir Khoja Ata, Khoja Abdullah Mervarid and others. They all rose and welcomed Navai.

Navai took a seat amongst his friends and a lively conversation ensued. Muhammed Sa'id, a skilled wrestler, musician and poet, was a great friend of Navai's; he let the words fall one by one through his thick lips as he related interesting stories of the art of wrestling. He had taken his 19-year-old nephew from the madrasah for the time being in order to train him for matches with famous foreign wrestlers who were expected in Herat and told those assembled how he was training him. The talk then turned on poetry, music, the philosophy of the dervishes and other abstract themes. Khoja Afzal came in and congratulated Navai on the Sultan's appointment. The friends were overjoyed at Navai's new appointment. Navai was astonished at the speed at which the news of his appointment had been spread round. Pahlawan, his broad bearded face wreathed in a smile, said excitedly:

"This is a golden page in the history of ancient Khorasan."

"Today the happiness of the people has been born," added Khoja Afzal.

Majd ad-Din, Nizam al-Mulk, Emir Moghol and several *begs* entered the room. Their perplexed faces told that they knew what had happened. Parwanachi Majd ad-Din tried to retain as haughty a mien as possible. Emir Moghol kept looking at Majd ad-Din, winking significantly with his tipsy eyes. The Barlas princes maintained a morose silence. Cunning Nizam al-Mulk, richly dressed as usual and preening himself like a peacock, was the only one who went up to the poet and congratulated him in a whisper on his appointment to such a high post. Navai smiled mockingly.

"In my opinion," he said in a loud voice, "there are neither high nor low posts. Were it necessary for the benefit of the people I would gladly undertake the duties of a simple soldier."

Nizam al-Mulk turned his eyes away. He stroked his magnificent beard with a hand bedecked with flashing rings and slowly shook his head.

"That, of course, is as it should be," he said.

Palace servants soon appeared and invited all present to the banquet. The whole crowd rose noisily.

II

Two days later there was a great celebration in Navai's house.

Many people gathered in the big white house. The host did not sit down for a moment for such was his manner; he courteously welcomed all newcomers. He went quietly to the kitchen to see how the cooks were working, giving instructions to one, reminding another of something, and then left. He looked in at the pantry to see whether the halvah and other sweetmeats were ready. He ordered his people to cook more and better. Whenever people gathered in his house Navai always took infinite trouble to entertain them.

The big, luxuriously furnished room was filled with *begs*, high officials and famous poets and scholars from Herat, Iraq and Azerbaijan. There was not yet any general conversation, everybody talked to his neighbour. In a nearer corner several *begs* were talking of war and hunting. Sultan Murad was talking softly in Arabic with an Iraqi scholar. The giant Pahlawan Muhammed Sa'id was engaged in a friendly conversation with a fussy little old man, an astronomer. The Sultan's chief astrologer could easily and speedily read anything in the stars, making use of their free, secret counsels:

fortune or misfortune, good or evil, success or failure. If Ulugbek's work, to use Navai's expression, had brought the heavens down to earth, that is, had made the laws governing the motions of the stars comprehensible to people, then that old man had made the celestial distances more distant and hidden them behind the thick veil of mystery. When a poor man ought to take off or don his trousers, on which day the Sultan should sit on his golden throne, when to write a love letter to a loved one, when to prepare poison for an enemy—on all these matters the astrologer could give advice direct from the stars. From time immemorial it had been the custom in the palace to arrange all important affairs and holiday events at times selected by the astrologers. On this day he had also selected the hour for Navai to first affix his emir's seal.

"Our science tells us that the Lord appointed one star the ruler of each day and another the wazir of that day," said the astrologer, giving emphasis to his words by movements of his hands. "Today the ruler of all things is the sun and his wazir is the moon. If you delve deeply into the nature of things you will see that all noteworthy events have occurred on such days. My Lord Alisher's introduction to his new duty

occurs on a most auspicious day. We have appointed the hour of Venus for the placing of the seal. This is the hour of all worthy deeds. Venus is in the apogee today, that is, in the seventh heaven. Her image is in complete accordance with the fundamental aims and nature of Alisher. For Venus is depicted as a beautiful girl, dancing with *chang* and *kamancha* in her hands, the attributes of beauty, joy and success."

Muhammed Sa'id asked the old man to continue but at that moment the Sultan's personal servants arrived from the palace bringing Navai the emir's gold-embroidered robes. Navai opened the bundle and with a bashful smile donned the rich raiment. His friends took pleasure in congratulating him but the Barlas *begs*, Majd ad-Din and a few of the civil servants who followed them like shadows confined themselves to official pronouncements of congratulation striving in vain to conceal the gleam of envy in their eyes. One of the new arrivals took a scroll in his hand, raised it above his head and then handed it respectfully to Navai. It was a decree that began with the usual formula: "Abul Ghazi Sultan Husein Baikara, our word." The new emir had to attach his seal to an official document for the first time at this ceremonial assembly.

There was complete silence. All eyes—and what different thoughts and emotions they expressed—were fixed on Navai. The poet sat with his head slightly bowed: he seemed agitated and confused. The significant glances of the *begs* and civil servants met for an instant and parted again as though they were afraid of each other. Even Muzaffar Barlas, the Sultan's spoiled favourite, strong in his past services and frequently refusing to obey the Sultan—even he turned pale: "Surely that poet will not place his seal higher than those of all other emirs?"

When Navai attached his seal to the decree a sigh of relief swept through the hall. The new emir had attached his seal in such a way that nobody could place his below it.

Ataullah, the poet, and Burhan ad-Din, the famous scholar, read that which they had written for the chronicles on the occasion of this important event. Several poets then recited with suitable pathos the odes they had dedicated to Navai. On this famous day the poet's friends and relatives and representatives of the people came one after the other to congratulate the poet. After a grand, joyful and lively banquet the party broke up.

SISTERS

by Askad Mukhtar

Chapter Sixteen

I

...Jurakhon walked lightly along the shady side of the street. At the corner where the *chaikhana* stood she did not cross to the other side as she used to do. Fanning herself with a little handkerchief, she calmly went past the *chaikhana*, treading the beaten ground which had been sprinkled with water by the alert *chaikhana*-keeper. Jurakhon was no longer afraid that she would be the target of abuse or mockery. All that now reached her from the *chaikhana* was a respectful whisper: "It's her! I'm telling you it's her...."

Yet there was a time when Jurakhon was afraid of showing herself in Naimancha; at any rate she never dared to remain there until nightfall.

Once dark, poverty-stricken and dispossessed, Naimancha which had been entangled in the web spun by Kudratullah-beg was

changing before people's eyes. The house of the shopkeeper was boarded up and the *beg's* workshop was deserted.... The old town quarter was now recognized by the renovated building housing a women's co-operative, the haberdashery store with its coat of bright blue paint and constant crowd of women from all over the town, and the new school that had been built by the people living in the district. A weaving mill was planned and once built it would make Naimancha one of the central districts in the town.

Near Anakhon's house the street was empty and silent. Not even children's voices were to be heard. Jurakhon stopped at the wicket for a moment, unintentionally glancing at the spot where Anakhon was attacked. The man who had stabbed at her with a knife was never found. That was not fortuitous and it showed that in Naimancha there were still places where an assassin could hide.

A white spot under the wicket drew Jurakhon's attention. It looked like a handkerchief which somebody had dropped accidentally. Jurakhon bent to pick it up and her hand stopped in mid-air. It was not a handkerchief but a sheet of paper, neatly folded in four.... A stone kept it in place. There was no dust on it, an indication that it had been newly put there.

Jurakhon picked it up and unfolded it. There were two lines in Arabic written in pencil. Jurakhon read the note and quickly looked about her as though feeling there was somebody behind her. But the street was empty and silent as before. A man's footprints, distinctly outlined in the thick layer of soft dust, ran diagonally from the wicket.

Jurakhon leaned against the wicket, feeling her strength leaving her. Her heart sank within her. She re-read the note and forced herself to straighten up. Perhaps the enemy was watching her through some slit. Well if he was he would not find Jurakhon a coward!

The wicket opened and Anakhon and Khojiya came to meet the guest and both exclaimed:

"What's the matter with you, sister?"

"What happened?"

"Have you been here long, Khojiya?" Jurakhon asked.

"I... I have just come."

Jurakhon showed the note.

"Did you notice this at the wicket?"

"N-no."

"And you didn't see anybody around the house?"

"Nobody."

"Think."

"I'm quite sure. It was as empty as now. . . ."

"And you didn't see anybody either, Anakhon?"

"I don't think so. What is this?"

"Our 'friends' know exactly when and where we go," Jurakhon replied, handing the note to Anakhon.

They went into the yard. Anakhon glanced at the note and gasped. She gave it to Khojiya and the latter read it aloud:

"This time you will not die, but if you set your foot here again your corpse will be carried out of Naimancha."

"Who could have written it?" Holnisa said in bewilderment.

Anakhon angrily turned her face to the wicket.

"It must have been the same man who attacked me."

The women from the *kishlak* began to fuss and wail. One of them put on her *paranja*. Another, tugging at the collar of her dress, spat into her bosom.

"O Lord, have mercy upon us. . . . There is no God but God!"

But the oldest among them wiped the sweat off her brow and shouted at her friends:

"Stop cackling like hens! What are you

wailing for, as though somebody had died? Give a person a chance to speak...."

She turned to Jurakhon:

"Pay no attention, daughter. May the hand wither that wrote such a letter! Who'll dare to raise a hand against your priceless head? If need be, you'll put on an old *paranja*, say mine.... You'll cover your face and go away. Nobody will recognize you."

Jurakhon smiled gently, looking closely at the now silent women.

"Where are you all from, aunt?"

"They're from a distant *kishlak*," Bashorat put in quickly. "They've come to take a look at you."

Tursunoi, who was clinging to her mother, kept her eyes on the note.

Jurakhon threw a reproachful glance at Khojiya. The latter caught the meaning of the glance and folded the note and put it in the pocket of her dress. Then Jurakhon shook hands with each of the women from the *kishlak* and fondly patted Tursunoi on the cheek. The girl was paralyzed with fear. She smiled piteously, squinting at Khojiya's pocket.

Jurakhon gently drew the girl to her, made her sit down beside her and holding her in a tight embrace said to the women who had arranged themselves in a semi-circle:

"No, my dear aunt! No, sisters! I did not throw off the *paranja* only to hide behind it again. That is exactly what wicked, dishonest people, the enemies of our life, would have liked to see! But never more will anything hide me from the sun—neither the *yashmak*, nor threats. I have burnt my *paranja*, and this is not the first time that people are trying to frighten me.... I am a communist. And communists and ... Komsomols," Jurakhon added, looking in Tursunoi's face, "must not be afraid of darkness, or of notes such as this, or of the medicine-woman, who is only a silly fraud.... Don't you agree, little girl?"

"Yes," Tursunoi murmured with a look full of trust and gratitude at Jurakhon.

A faint flush coloured her pale face.

Jurakhon lifted her head dreamily.

"Which of us remembers what was in our heart the hour when we were born and our eyes opened and we saw the light for the first time? Nobody, true? But still it seems that I remember and shall never forget that hour as long as I live. I have told people about it and shall never tire of telling them about it...."

The women from the *kishlak* exchanged glances, a look of interest appearing on their faces.

"How can you remember such a thing?" exclaimed the oldest of the women.

"I'll tell you how. It happened four years ago, in nineteen hundred and twenty one.... Yes, yes! That was the year—not an hour earlier—when I was born and my eyes opened and I saw the light. Seventy of us women, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmenians—went to Moscow to a conference. We went there to seek advice, to learn how to live in a new way, in a way in which we would all be happy. It was a long journey and when we arrived we were dazzled by what we saw. There was so much to see that we simply could not see it all. At first we were afraid of walking in the streets—the houses were taller than the tallest minaret. We shrank back at every step, fearing that they would tumble down on our heads...."

Holnisa clicked her tongue in wonder. Jurakhon continued:

"We were ushered into a great white hall and told that Lenin would come and welcome us.... I wore my *paranja*. But before coming there I had noticed that in the streets the women stopped and gazed at me as at something unusual. There was pity in their eyes. And they spoke to me in the way people speak to children, as if in a *paranja* I could not understand the speech of adults.

That hurt me at first and then I felt ashamed. I realized that I had hurt myself, that I had abased myself. It was as though I was walking about with a soother in my mouth. . . . In the white hall I stood and thought to myself: Lenin would come up to me and stretch out his hand . . . and I? Would I look at him and speak to him through the *yashmak*? He too would look at me with pity. . . . Everything in me revolted! I felt my blood boiling within me. I bore it until Lenin came. When he appeared and began to greet us, I could stand it no longer. I tore the *paranja* off my head and the accursed thing fell at Lenin's feet. If I had not done that I would have been consumed by fire on the spot or my conscience would have tormented me for the rest of my life. And Lenin . . . do you know what he did? He suddenly bent down and wanted to pick the *paranja* up, to help me. He thought it had fallen off accidentally. I don't know what made me do it or how I found the strength, but I stepped on the *paranja* with my foot . . . like I would on a snake! Lenin understood the gesture better than any words I could say and gave me his hand.

" 'How do you do?' he asked, 'What is your name?'

"I don't remember what I replied. And he said:

" 'I congratulate you, Comrade Jurakhon.'

"I think I said 'Thank you.'

" 'Thank you, comrade,' he said, 'from the Party of the Bolsheviks.' That is what he said to me!

"And then he added:

" 'Please convey my greetings to the Uzbek women, to everybody who is fighting for human and civic dignity. The Soviet Government will support you in this struggle.'

"Only later did I understand the meaning of his words. I could not reply properly. All I said was: 'Thank you, thank you....' It was the same with all the other women.... We had read and heard that Lenin was a giant warrior. No, he does not look like a giant warrior. He is quite simple and ordinary. But I shall never forget how he shook my hand.... This very hand...."

Jurakhon raised her right hand and then pressed it to her breast and all the women breathlessly gazed at the hand as though expecting to see something extraordinary about it.

"Now tell me, aunt," Jurakhon said, turning to the oldest of the women, "can I hide behind a *paranja* after that?"

"I am an uneducated woman from a *kishlak*. If you took my words close to heart, for-

give me, silly old woman that I am. Praised be God, who created people like you."

"God also created people like the man who wrote this note," Jurakhon said.

The women from the *kishlak* all began to talk at once.

"May this man's hand wither.... May he fall into hell...."

When dusk began to set in, all the women went to see Jurakhon home. There was a slight delay at the wicket.

"What are we waiting for? Come, it is late," Khojiya said.

"Are you coming with us?" Jurakhon asked.

"I'll go with you as far as the City Committee...."

"Be quick then."

"I'm ready!" Khojiya replied.

She was without her *paranja*. Jurakhon turned round: the girl's *paranja* was rolled into a ball and shoved under the porch steps.

Pleased, Khojiya laughed quietly and happily....

Jurakhon embraced her. Anakhon and Bashorat also ran up to her, put their arms around her and kissed her on the cheek. Tursunoi too threw her arms round her neck.

"I shall never even begin wearing it," said

Tursunoi, hopping to the porch and stamping on the hem of the *paranja* that was sticking out from under the steps. . . .

Chapter Twenty

On the tenth of July the town was awakened by the roll of drums, the shrilling of *sur-nais** and the stentorian "vakh-vakha-vakhuva" of *karnais*.** The first rays of the dawn saw people thronging the streets. There was singing and laughter, the hubbub of conversation. Children ran about, filling the air with the notes of their reed pipes. Columns and crowds of people with banners, streamers and placards surged from all directions towards Naimancha. With them were bullock carts loaded with spades, hoes and barrows. When they passed through the marketplace, shop-keepers in velvet skull-caps looked out of their tiny shops. The wave of people bore them away as well, as it did everybody who was in its path, in the street, in the *chaikhanas* and the courtyards.

In less than an hour the vacant lot and Lion's Hill, which had been levelled by explosions, were filled with people from one

* Small wind-instrument with a high-pitched tone.

** Six-foot long trumpet.

end to the other. Wherever one looked there were the gay blue and red kerchiefs of the women, the gleaming bronzed shoulders of the men, who had stripped to the waist, and the glitter of the sun on the crow-bars and picks. Red Army platoons were lined up closer to the cemetery—they too had come to help. More and more people kept coming and it grew ever closer and noisier in the lot.

"What is this?" Dobrokhotoy kept repeating. He was both delighted and worried. "Nothing of the sort has ever happened. I've never seen anything like this in my life."

"This is *hoshar*.* National *hoshar*!" said Ergash. "The custom is ancient but the purpose is new."

They were standing in the centre of a tight ring of foremen and construction superintendents. The leaders of the columns demanded assignments. Some were excited and tugged the engineer by his sleeve.

"In turn, one at a time," the engineer replied, glancing at his drawings.

"But we came first. There was nobody here when we came!"

"Most of your people are young, isn't that so? You're the most able-bodied here..."

"Then why are you keeping us on a leash?"

* Mutual-aid in the fulfillment of some work.

"Have patience. You'll get a more difficult sector."

"And a more honourable one," added Yefim Danilovich.

"Allow me! Why more honourable?" put in another of the leaders. "Why are the bootmakers worse?"

"Take it easy. You will all be busy. We'll not overlook anybody. There's work enough. We'll give you all you can do—don't complain later!"

"The only thing the bootmakers will complain of is that they never have boots...."

The hum of voices gradually died down. The singing stopped. And at once there seemed to be more room. The work began.

"Comrade Sultanov," Jurakhon called to Ergash, "I have a private question to ask you. Have you written the letter?"

"About the cement? To Tashkent? Naturally!"

"No, to Moscow."

For a moment Ergash did not know what to say.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I did not go home last night. I slept on a table at the cloth weaver's. There isn't any time even to eat. I'll write it today, I promise."

"You'd never even have remembered it if I didn't remind you," Jurakhon reproached

him. "You saw your mother only for a moment and then left her again. It's wrong to forget about your mother, Ergash, even though you are a chief."

"There are so many mothers here, sister Jurakhon," Ergash said, looking about him with a merry twinkle. "It takes my breath away. I never expected it."

Jurakhon smiled, flattered.

"At least half are women, isn't that so?"

"The *paranjas* are hampering them, the *paranjas*..." noted Yefim Danilovich. "Otherwise we could have said that the women were setting the tone!"

"The *beg's* taken to his heels," Ergash said with mock regret. "I wasn't given the chance to see him with a spade in his hand. But the son is working like a horse ... did you see?"

A film of dust hung over the vacant lot and Lion's Hill. Wheels rang dully against the stones. The earth made a long swishing sound as it was thrown into the barrows. The rubble rattled against the boards. The uncoiled wheels squeaked.

From somewhere near the cemetery came the piteous hiccough-like braying of a stubborn mule. A wave of laughter rolled from one end of the vacant lot to the other. "Pull, pull... Harder... Get a move on, long-ears..."

In Abdusamat's sector the weeds were set alight. Hissing and crackling, the flames leapt into the air and black, stinking smoke curled about the ground. The fire swept across the prickly weeds, leaving behind flying ash and exposing hitherto invisible holes, cracks and burrows. It seemed that the stones, the land itself, was burning in the dust and smoke.

Six two-wheeled carts came rumbling up, dragging long planks by their ends. The planks, intended as roadways for the barrows, were quickly carried away.

The carters drove on to the dump and stopped in bewilderment. They could not see how the heaps could be moved with either hoes or pitchforks.

"You need crow-bars...."

"Look, they're as hard as rock...."

"Precious marble, did you say?"

"It would be a good idea to set it on fire, but it won't burn!"

Some of them tried to go closer to the heaps, but they drew back, unable to stand the stench.

A sturdy old man with grey hair came up with a crow-bar.

"Thank God, the air in our quarter will be cleaned at last."

He was from Naimancha. Swinging his

crow-bar, he angrily brought it down on one of the heaps.

"Away, vanish! This accursed heap did not let me breathe from the day I was born."

The carters followed his example with cries.

The women were stubbing the weeds, cutting the roots with axes, choppers and cleavers. They grubbed them out of the ground, carrying them away by the armful and throwing them into the fires.

Four women, holding each other by the waist, were pulling a peachwort bush out of the ground. It was as big and tough as a sak-saul tree and resisted their efforts. A plump young woman joined in the tug of war and pulled with all her strength. The root of the peachwort gave way and all the five women fell on the ground on top each other, laughing and squealing. The young woman sprang to her feet and began tickling the others, giving them no opportunity of getting up.

Jurakhon watched the romping from afar and rejoiced in the fun of her friends. They were happy and merry together. Hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder they were different than when they were alone.

Jurakhon stopped an elderly woman who was carrying on her shoulder a bundle of weeds wrapped in a *paranja* as in a piece of sacking.

"More strength to you!"

The woman threw the bundle on a heap and turned round. It was Kumri. Her arms were green from the weeds, her face was covered with dust and sweat. But her eyes were smiling.

Guessing what Jurakhon was thinking, she nodded at the merry group on the ground.

"Look, these poor things also know how to laugh, sister Jurakhon. It becomes them to romp about...."

"It becomes them to live the life of human beings, Aunt Kumri," said Jurakhon. "Who is your leader?"

"Bashorat, the daughter of Anakhon. Such a clever, efficient girl! She knows everything, may she grow up to be a beauty. She told us all what to do, gave an assignment to each of us. 'You do five squares, you do six....'"

"How many did you get?"

"She gave me six, telling me that since I am from Naimancha I should have that honour. As I said, she told everybody what to do.... Pity Anakhon isn't here to see her, to see this great festival of ours. Her heart is breaking at this very moment. Here she is!"

Bashorat came up in heavy, evidently her father's, boots. In her hands she had a *sagene**-

* An old Russian measure equal to seven feet.

measure, a pencil was stuck behind her ear in the manner of foremen, and her face was glowing.

Jurakhon stretched out her hand to her as to an equal.

"Tell me, is Tursunoi feeling better?"

"No.... I don't know what to do. Last night mother thought I was asleep and sat near Tursunoi and wept.... Oh, how she wept!"

Bashorat's voice trembled. Kumri furtively wiped away a tear.

"This evening brother Abdusamat and the Komsomols will sing for the people who've come to the *hoshar*. Oh, if only Tursunoi were here," Bashorat lowered her head.

A man's voice called her name and the girl instantly brightened up, replying energetically with an imperious wave of her hand.

"I'm like a telephone ... between the men and the women," she said merrily and ran away.

Jurakhon put her hand on Kumri's shoulder.

"Go and see Anakhon after work today. I can't...."

"Of course, sister, certainly."

Jurakhon went to old Anzirat, took her spade and, rolling up the sleeves of her dress, began to dig.

"Tiring, Grandmother Anzirat?"

"God be praised, daughter. Wait.... Why should you dig when there are so many people here?"

"Is it a sin?"

"No sin at all! It's a good deed you're doing! How many people there are in Naimancha and how many years we have lived here, but it never entered anybody's head to clear away this fly-market. God be praised that I have lived to see this bright day. God grant I shall also see a mill here."

"Remember, you wanted to die?"

"Yes, daughter mine, may God forgive me! It's horrid to think how I used to keep to myself. I'd wash my hands and fold them under my arm-pits. Now I envy our women who are travelling. Formerly only men, holy people, went to Mecca. But now ordinary women have gone to Moscow! Have you any news from them? I've worn myself out with waiting."

"I'm expecting something any day now."

"Rizvon, may she be ... I'm missing her in my old age. She's giving herself airs, there in Moscow. She'll return a factory worker—no joke that.... I too would like to see my dear friend. Ask her if she's pleased with me. After all, we are friends before God and be-

fore people. But to tell you the truth I have offended her. . . .”

“How could you offend a friend?”

“It was my ignorance, daughter, my ignorance. You know yourself. . . . I kept whispering in her ear the words of that woman who peddled opium—the one who was killed. But I knew, I knew very well, that she was an alien, an idler, without kith or kin. I suspected that she was lewd. With my own eyes I saw Kudratullah-khoja leaving her house just before dawn—may he trip over every third step for as long as he lives. I thought I was sinning against her, may God have mercy on us and preserve us against people like that. . . . Here, give me the spade, daughter. You can find yourself another.”

“Take a rest, grandmother. Go and talk to the people. Your words are stronger than a dozen navvies.”

“I am never silent,” Anzirat replied. “I have never been silent, God be praised.”

Suddenly, Jurakhon felt she was watched. She wanted to turn round but checked herself. Bending over the spade she glanced from under her elbow and involuntarily started.

Teacher Naimi was leaning on a pick and watching her over the shoulder of his neighbour. Jurakhon had never before seen such an expression in the eyes of the modest and

well-mannered teacher. In his eyes there was stark terror and fierce hate—the look of a trapped polecat.

But as soon as Jurakhon straightened up, Naimi swung his pick, bending over his work. And no longer could anything but zeal be noticed on his face. He worked so hard with his pick that the men around him were amazed. Stones and clods of earth flew out from under it in all directions. His silk shirt was dark with sweat and it was sticking to his body. Naimi wore a rope around his waist like a regular porter or navvy.

He worked with ardour with thick clouds of dust swirling around him, and Jurakhon thought that she had been mistaken—the teacher could not have given her such a look.

She went to him.

“And you are with us today?”

“Many of my pupils are here,” Naimi said in an offended tone, wiping the sweat off his temple. “You’re forgetting that! But forgive me, I don’t want to be distracted. Later, if I may, I shall come to you for a small favour.”

“You can ask now, if you like.”

“No, no, after work. And, if possible, I shouldn’t like anyone else to know.”

“Hm! Interesting.”

Naimi made a low bow.

Near by, Bony Maksum sat down to shake the earth out of the top of his boots. Above the thudding of the spades and hoes his ingratiating voice could be heard saying:

"Although I've lived a lonely life, I know a thing or two about love. A man must be faithful and the woman must be submissive, yes. . . . If that is lacking there is neither purpose nor relish in family life."

There was no spade or barrow near Maksum. It seemed that he did not work so much as amuse the people who were working.

"A capon once went to petition for a cock. . ." somebody joked.

"And had his comb pecked by the hens for his pains!" another added.

But Bony Maksum went on imperturbably:

"I'll say this for myself. My wife, whom I married when she conquered my heart and I burned away with love and passion, ran away from me on the second day after our marriage. She ran away from behind the *chemyldyk*.* But I bear no grudge against her. Since I am the husband, I must be faithful to her. I never married again, I swear, for such was my loyalty. My wife found what people call her destined one. I go to see her from time to

* The screen behind which a newly-married couple spend the first night.

time even now and I take delight in her children. God be thanked, I did not desecrate my loyalty. Yes...."

"How does her destined one meet you?"

"With a choice word? Or with a choice stick?"

"I converse with him in the same way as I am conversing with you," Maksim replied without a smile.

Jurakhon turned away.

In the distance she made out a man with a bicycle and wearing a faded cap with the peak at the back of his head. He was wheeling his bicycle in front of him and speaking glibly with the people around him. Everybody made way for him, pointing to Ergash and Yefim Danilovich. He was the long-awaited postman.

Jurakhon saw the postman hand Ergash a letter. Ergash turned his back on the postman and opened the letter, while Yefim Danilovich laughed good-naturedly and slapped him on his shoulder. Jurakhon hurried to them. The letter was from Moscow!

Ergash opened the letter and raised his brows in perplexity.

"Chief of the factory project, Comrade Ergash Sultanov." What did this mean? He glanced at the signature. The letter was

from Khojiya. Why was she using this official tone? Her letters had always begun with "My dearest brother Ergash...."

He read quickly, eagerly. But nowhere, not in any line, did he find his name again. Not a single word of endearment.... "We have safely arrived in the great city." It was the same to the very end: "We.... Our women.... The local women...."

The line above the signature had been carefully crossed out. Only separate letters could be made out. Ergash stared at this line, endeavouring to guess what Khojiya could have written that later she should change her mind and cross it out, but Yefim Danilovich took the letter away from him.

Reading it attentively, he turned to Ergash.

"It's a good letter! Magnificent girl.... What are you dissatisfied about, chief?"

"I? I also think it's ... well written. Only ... there's a line crossed out."

"Where?"

Ergash pointed with his finger.

"This?" Yefim Danilovich gravely examined the line. "But it's absolutely clear. You couldn't read it?"

"N-no. And you?"

Yefim Danilovich frowned to hide his smile.

"I'm surprised at you. Are you illiterate,

or what? You understand, the girl let slip an unhappy phrase."

"Unhappy?"

"Of course. Look for yourself."

Interested, Ergash bent over the letter while Yefim Danilovich moved his finger along the crossed-out line and "read" it without looking at it:

"My dearest, I am missing you and surely you are missing me too? How happy I would have been if you suddenly appeared by my side here. . . ."

Ergash lifted his head and burst out laughing.

"Uncle Yefim," he said, the way he used to call him before serving in the Army, "from now on I shall take all her letters to you. You read them well and you have a pleasant voice."

"All I can say is that a shyly crossed-out line such as this can be found not only in a letter but in a person's heart," Yefim Danilovich said, "and not only in a girl's heart."

"You again mean Dobrokhotov? Did you hear what he said? 'How many hands for nothing. . . .' He meant our people! Hands for nothing!"

"I hear everything, Ergash. But it was after these words that the crossed-out line stood and the whole point was in it."

“What point?”

“Read it for yourself.”

Dobrokhotoy, covered with dust from head to foot, his shirt torn at the elbow, ran wearily down Lion's Hill. Producing from his pocket a watch on a short silver chain, he pointed to it.

“Is it time?” Yefim Danilovich asked, glancing at his own watch.

“It's beyond me where they get their energy from,” the engineer said. “They're not workers, they're lions! And the women are lionesses. . . . However, the sun's already at its zenith. Let them have a breather at least. I expect they're hungry. The women possibly want to see the children that have been left at home. . . . As a matter of fact, the children are also here.”

Yefim Danilovich smiled, waiting to hear what Ergash would say. Ergash vaguely shrugged his shoulders. Jurakhon quickly walked up to him, stretching out her hand for the letter.

“What will I get if I give the letter?” Yefim Danilovich demanded.

Almost in the same instant that Ergash gave the signal, the vibrant clang of iron on rail rolled across the vacant lot and Lion's Hill.

"Knock off! Light your fags!" a voice shouted in Russian from the direction of the cemetery near which the Red Armymen were working.

A song was started in Abdusamat's sector. Some people sought the shelter of what shade there was. Others sat down where they had been working and produced tobacco, bread, onions and salt. Only a few went home.

Jurakhon took the letter to the women.

Over a fire water was already boiling in a big black pot brought by Kumri. The lid rattled.

An aged carter called to Kumri from afar, saying that he would come to her for tea. Kumri replied that she was afraid he would scald his lips.

"Comrades," Jurakhon began in her low, rich voice. "Sit closer if you want to hear me read what our country-women write from Moscow."

Like echoes, voices sounded all over the vacant lot:

"Letter . . . from Moscow . . . from our women. . . ."

The women grouped themselves around Jurakhon. The men also drew closer, but they sat down some distance away so as not to disconcert the women.

"Ah, Rizvon, may she be... so she gave me a thought after all!" grandmother Anzi-rat declared loudly, sitting down in the first row, an expression of expectation on her face.

The other women also comported themselves with more freedom than usual. Many of them took off their *paranjas* but only slightly lowered the kerchiefs over their faces.

While Jurakhon read the letter there was general silence, which was broken only now and then by subdued exclamations.

"We live here as in our native town, in our own home. There is a Russian woman, a weaver, to teach each of us and from the very first day we came to love each other like sisters. They gave us a place in their hostel and are always with us, at the loom, in the canteen, and during walks.

"Frequently they question us about our life. They asked us to send you their proletarian greetings.

"We grew dizzy when we saw the mill they have here. It's a whole town. There are huge blocks of buildings with flowerbeds in front of them. If only you could see the machines in the mill! At first we were dismayed, but when we began to grasp the work we

realized that although these machines are very complicated they are also very obedient. I can tell you that we too will have such machines. And, in general, what we are seeing here now is what we shall have in the future. That is what we were told at a lecture...."

Dobrokhotov sat down on to the ground beside the workers and as he listened to Jurakhon he tried to understand what was moving him so strangely: the naïvety of the letter or the pride with which it was heard? The women did not understand some of the words in Khojiya's letter: "hostel," "blocks of buildings...." Jurakhon had to explain them. And these were the people who were out to build a mill? But why not? Was it so long ago that the Russian worker, who now reads Marx and Lenin, was an ignorant serf?

The women wrote from Moscow that they wished success to the builders in Naimancha. What frank delight these words provoked! The women and men began to shout, to clap, to jump to their feet and throw caps in the air. Without noticing it, Dobrokhotov too rose to his feet and began to shout "Hurrah."

A slap on his back brought him round. Ergash impetuously put his arms round

Dobrokhotov's shoulders and whispered fervently in his ear:

"I never meant to wound your feelings, engineer. Don't be offended, all right?"

"Of course, and that goes for me too ... don't be angry..." Dobrokhotov replied, deeply moved.

After midday, when work was resumed, the people bent to it even more enthusiastically than before. Abdusamat's team went for their spades and barrows long before the clanging of the rail.

Until late dusk a cloud of dust hung over the vacant lot and the men's shirts, wet with sweat, did not get dry.

When it began to grow dark, the Komso-mols from the carriage-repair works smoothed a piece of ground on what remained of Lion's Hill and paved it with planks. In a trice, word went round that the performers had arrived and that there would be entertainment.

Kumri, who had finished clearing her six "squares," was the first to bring her children, seating them down right beside the planks.

Torches were lit round the "stage." Sparks shot out from the torches and there was a smell of paraffin and burnt rags. The old and the young sat down in a circle, shoulder to

shoulder. The children surrounded the platform like ants. The performers had to step over them to get to the "stage."

Dobrokhotov was at a loss as to what to do with himself: normally he should make the rounds and check on what had been done that day, but at heart he wanted to throw up everything and with the others to see and listen to the worker-performers. People called to him, making a comfortable seat for him on a barrow.... He yielded and settled down on the barrow with pleasure, stretching his tired and aching legs out between bent backs.

Blue-shirted Komsomols appeared on the platform. They were in the same clothes in which they had worked during the day—only the dust had been lightly brushed off. But there were red ribbons pinned to the breasts of the lads and girls and everybody realized that they were the performers.

The huge crowd fell silent. Two children could be distinctly heard arguing:

"They'll sing now...."

"No, they won't, they'll perform...."

Somebody hissed at them and they too fell silent.

But the performers took a long time to begin. The lads shifted their weight from one

foot to the other and exchanged glances, the girls turned away in embarrassment, covering their faces with their sleeves as though hiding from the glare of the torches. In the audience people began to laugh.

Abdusamat ran to the front of the platform. The performers braced themselves up, stood closer together and in a straighter line. But Abdusamat too seemed to have forgotten why people had gathered here. He walked down the line of Komsomols, quietly asking them about something. In reply, the performers shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders.

"I wonder what happened?" Dobrokhotoy thought, feeling awkward as though he was also standing on the "stage."

Suddenly somebody touched his shoulder. He turned round. Ergash beckoned to him.

Dobrokhotoy felt that something had gone wrong.

Ergash's brows were knit and he looked worried.

"Have you seen Jurakhon?" he asked, taking the engineer aside.

"No."

"I haven't seen her for some time. I've looked everywhere. Strange! Where could she have gone to?"

Although they spoke in an undertone, their conversation was heard.

Like a burst of wind, an alarmed whispering swept through the crowd illumined by the uneven, wavering light of the torches. Abdusamat bent forward and peered into the darkness beyond the torches, trying to hear what the people were saying. There was no longer any laughter.

"Where is Jurakhon? Where is she, people!" a woman's voice cried.

Yefim Danilovich appeared.

His face—his eyes, his cheek-bones, his moustache—looked as though it had hardened into stone. His hands, clenched into fists, were motionless.

Without looking where he was going, he went through the narrow corridor that the people made for him. He stopped at the platform which had become empty in a thrice. For a long time he could not utter a single word. The people stood still, waiting silently and with consternation watching him breathe heavily and making an effort to master himself.

Then, in the light of the torches, they saw tears trickling down his cheeks.

"Brothers ... sisters..." he said at last. "The enemy has killed our Jurakhon!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Early next morning people again streamed to the construction site from all parts of the town. The streets were again filled with crowds, but this time they were silent. The people moved like a cloud before a thunderstorm. And on the banners, the wind blew about black ribbons.

A long coffin strewn with flowers stood on a bier on Lion's Hill. Jurakhon's white face, which seemed to be alive, gazed at the people with closed eyes. Her lips were slightly parted, her fine eyebrows were just a little raised. She looked as though she had not finished saying what she had started to say. It appeared as though death had struck at the very moment that she was saying something kind, something heartfelt.

An old woman, with a black kerchief tied round her snow-white head—the mother of Jurakhon—and Anakhon were sitting at the head of the bier with their arms around each other. Anakhon was pressing the grief-stricken mother's head to her breast and gently swaying with her as though rocking a baby. She gazed at Jurakhon's face with dry, fiery eyes. And only her lips twitched from time to time as if she had sudden spasms of pain. At the foot of the deceased stood Bashorat with

her head defiantly bared and looking ungirlishly stern as though she had reached womanhood overnight.

Bidding Jurakhon farewell, the people walked slowly past the coffin, showering flowers on the coffin, the bier and the ground. Meanwhile, an ever-swelling crowd such as had never before assembled in this small town faced Lion's Hill in a semi-circle. There was a great throng of women in front. From time to time they were seized and shaken by a muffled, constrained sobbing. Then again there was grim silence. The children grew quiet. Hushed and sad, they pressed close to their elders, not daring to ask questions, unable to bring themselves to move away a single step.

A group of strange women in *paranjas* came up to the coffin, crowding close together. There were five of them. Anakhon recognized them as being from the distant *kishlak*. Their leader lifted her *yashmak* and, spreading out her arms, fell on the coffin, sobbing aloud and wailing. She could not check herself for a long time and nobody stopped her.

The sun was high in the sky when Yefim Danilovich and Ergash went up to Anakhon and stood beside her.

Anakhon rose to her feet and took her kerchief off her head. From one end to the other the crowd stirred in terrible silence.

"Comrades.... Workers, honest people," Anakhon said without raising her voice, but she was heard everywhere. "My dear sisters.... Look how many people have come to see our fearless Jurakhon off on her last journey. Look how many friends she has, how many people love her.... I wanted to name the women she has helped. Their number is great. I shall not name them because she has helped everybody gathered here: the women and the men. She has helped everybody who has a worker's hands and a worker's conscience. Look at our town: it began with the co-operative ... then shops, a new school, the mill that we are building—how many good things! Tell me: where is Kudratullah, the master of Naimancha, where is the shop-keeper Matkovul, where are all the lesser spiders? Any child can tell you that we now have more good things and fewer bad people in our town. And each of us knows that Jurakhon started these things, that she gave them her heart. For our sake, for the sake of the people, she did not spare her strength and she did not spare her life." Anakhon took a step forward and raised her voice: "And such a person ... has been killed by the enemy!"

A sigh came from the crowd as though it had escaped from a single breast.

Anakhon went on, her head bent over the coffin:

"We loved you, sister. We shall never forget you! And I swear to you.... Let us all take an oath, comrades! We shall finish the work you have started. We shall build the mill. We shall build a new life. Today we are mourning... mourning for you.... We failed to protect you, Jurakhon... forgive us. But there is no fear in our hearts. Rest assured, we shall not falter. And tomorrow, when our mill will be standing in this piece of wasteland, your name will be the first to be remembered. And then you shall be with us as though you were alive! Farewell, sister. Farewell, our mother!" Anakhon turned sharply, waving her fist in the air. "Listen to me, people. A curse on the murderers! Eternal memory to Comrade Jurakhon!"

Hundreds of voices echoed those words.

With her face wet with tears, but with burning eyes, Kumri ran to the coffin. She threw up and then stretched her black, work-worn hands to Anakhon.

"Anakhon! Sister! You have told us what a person the enemies have killed, may their eyes burst in their heads, may they never see the light of day! But you did not say that she died with an open face! The enemy has hidden himself, but

she did not hide. Now this is what I want to say. Let them kill me as well. Let them also see my open face and let their eyes fill with blood! There!" With both her hands she tore her *paranja* off her head, bunched it up and flung it on the ground. Her thinning hair with its lines of silver fell loose. At that minute her wrathful face was terrible to see. "Let the enemy look me in the eyes. Let the cowardly jackal show himself. . . ."

"Sister!" cried another voice, breaking the tense silence. "Sister. . . . I too am with you!" Holnisa, breathing hard with emotion, appeared beside Kumri. "Sisters, you all know of the kind things that Jurakhon did to me. Ignorant person that I am, I did not listen to her counsels. It is a bitter cup to me that now she will not hear me. People! Listen to me! When Jurakhon saved me from the paws of Matkovul, she said to me as a mother: 'Now you are free, Holnisa. Open your face to the light.' I was afraid to do it. . . . Look now, people! I shall not say farewell to her until I follow her advice!"

Taking off her red *paranja* and *yashmak*, she threw them on Kumri's *paranja* and, taking a step back, spat on them.

As soon as she did that she wanted to run to the crowd of women, to submit to an involuntary inducement to hide. She was stopped

by a fellow villager, the leader of the women from her *kishlak*. Embracing Holnisa in full view of everybody and kissing her on her forehead, the old woman went with her to the coffin, bowed to it and then bowed to the people.

"Allow me to speak also, my daughters and sons. Recently I heard Jurakhon speak. She was alive and courageous. And the words that she spoke were wise. She told us about Lenin. Her eyes saw Lenin. He shook her hand. Now her eyes have dimmed and the hand is cold. Never more will we hear her. But I, too, an old woman, want to look at her for the last time, openly and freely."

The grey, dusty *paranja* slipped from the head and shoulders of the woman. She was still youthful looking and it was obvious that she had been beautiful when she was young. Stepping over the *paranja*, she embraced Jurakhon's feet, saying with devout ecstasy, with tears of freedom:

"Your life has been short, but the star of your happiness is high in the heavens! Let your high star shine for us, too."

The silence that had reigned until then was shattered. From the crowd, bunched-up *paranjas* and *yashmaks* flew over the heads of the women to Jurakhon's coffin. In a few minutes

there was a big pile. Both the women and the men shouted:

"Burn them!"

"Burn this rubbish, these black shrouds!"

"Burn them, so we can see it."

"Burn them so that nothing remains! And throw the ashes to the wind!"

Nazokat, no longer in a *paranja*, ran to the coffin; the coins intertwined with her hair glittered in the sun.

"Dear sisters," her voice rang out above the shouts. "I shall speak to this grey-haired mother." She bowed to Jurakhon's mother, who was sitting hunched up at Anakhon's feet. "Mother! Do not grieve, straighten your back. Your daughter was as a real sister to us. And all of us are your daughters. We shall love you as we loved her and we shall be like her!"

In the meantime, Abdusamat threw a burning torch into the pile of *paranjas*. Bashorat threw another. With paraffin poured over it, the heap of rags and horse hair burst into flames. Crackling and hissing, a stinking column of smoke rose to the sky. More and more grey-black bundles were added to the fire.

The women with bared heads crowded round. Those of the women who had not cast off their *paranjas* stayed behind, but they too stood on tiptoes and craned their necks over

the heads and shoulders in front of them to get a view of the cherished fire.

Some, who had come more out of curiosity than sympathy, quietly separated themselves from the crowd and left unnoticeably. A few fanatical old men stood in a solitary group. They had not dared to raise their voices today.

Unexpectedly Naimi appeared by the dying fire, waving away the ashes flying in the air. He was without his stick. He wanted to speak.

"Citizens," he began pompously in a screeching voice. "We committed the *paranjas* to the flames. That means that we have committed the old way of life to the flames!"

Something made Anakhon move away from him, while Ergash muttered furiously:

"Snake. . . ."

Naimi looked round, shrank back, coughed and hurriedly concluded:

"Here's what I'll say: May the enemy be cursed . . . and may freedom and enlightenment flourish!"

He hurried away and disappeared in the crowd.

The fire died down. The wind carried away the grey ashes.

The people lifted the bier with the coffin of their daughter. Again a silence descended upon the closely united crowd. Though their heads were bent in deep sorrow and they

hunched up their shoulders, these people never felt so close to one another as now. Never before had so many friends gathered together in Naimancha.

The procession did not last long. Jurakhon was buried in a spot indicated by the engineer: in front of the façade of the future mill. The sun was sinking in the west when the people began to disperse from the fresh grave.

THE HEALER OF THE BLIND

by **Abdullah Kahhar**

Can that be you, Mullah Umar?
Is it you the hunter's arrow awaits?

From an old song.

And so Ahmad Palwan* awaited death. Perhaps it would be better to say that death awaited Ahmad Palwan.... He had not the least desire to be translated to another world, but, trussed up like a sheep and placed side by side with the sergeant who had been ordered to carry out the execution, how could he cry "Yes" in one direction and "No" in the other?

The executioner was a short but thickset youth. When he pushed him, Palwan swayed like a slender reed and fell over backwards, pressing under him arms tied crosswise behind his back.

* Palwan—strong man, Titan.

With a hefty kick the executioner forced Palwan to his feet.

As he rose Palwan twitched his shoulders to see whether anything was sprained or broken but suddenly, with sour humility, remembered that now neither breaks nor sprains had any meaning for him.

The executioner gave Palwan another shove, a lighter one this time, and he ran or rather hobbled a few steps that brought him directly in front of the earthen dais, where, on cushions, lay the head of the gang—the one-eyed *kurbashi*—in an extremely greasy striped robe. To the right of the *kurbashi* sat their religious mentor, the hunchbacked *ulem*, to his left sat the yellow-faced Indian doctor, the *tabib*, while behind him the owner of the house had found a place for himself—he was a little fidgety old man who looked like a bat.

The *kurbashi* had only just finished a whole dish of pilau, spots of grease shone on his pock-marked cheeks and grains of rice showed white in his thick, uncombed beard. At any other time one savage glance from him was enough to strike fear into the most fearless of men but at that moment, when greasy satiety made his belly heavy, he was limp and weak of will. Inconquerable sleepiness was getting a grip on all the muscles of the

heavy body in which he tried in vain to arouse a dormant fury.

With the greatest of difficulty opening his one good eye that at that moment could see next to nothing at all, the *kurbashi* filled his lungs with air and shouted with all his might:

"Spawn of hell! How much longer have we got to wait for the names of your confederates?"

Ahmad Palwan still retained his former silence. Could he add the slightest thing to what had already been said? He had certainly killed Ismail Effendi, but he had had no confederates, except the axe.

The *kurbashi* had regarded Ismail as his chief lieutenant and, indeed, the effendi had been the right wing of the vulture. When a bullet from a red-starred cavalryman had pierced Ismail Effendi's breast near Alkar Mazar the *kurbashi* had seized him out of the very thick of the battle, thrown him across his saddle and galloped away to the mountains with him. If the chase had not been so hot the *kurbashi* would have bound the wounds of his faithful lieutenant but the horsemen with the red stars on their high, pointed helmets had pursued the runaways so stubbornly that a

halt, even for a moment, had been out of the question.

It was night by the time the *kurbashi*, after losing a half of his horsemen, reached the mountain village where Ahmad Palwan lived. The effendi was bleeding profusely and he asked them not to take him any farther but to leave him in the house of some reliable man.

The *kurbashi* had two or three followers in that village that he trusted implicitly. But the effendi could not be placed in any of their houses because they were *bais* and the *kurbashi* knew full well that the red star soldiers were hostile then by way of precaution to all the rich and respected *bais*. The *kurbashi* reasoned with justice that the most reliable refuge for the effendi would be the house of a poor man and decided to leave the dying man in Palwan's pitiful hovel.

Ahmad Palwan took the effendi directly from the hands of the *kurbashi* and promised not only to look after the wounded man but to ensure him undisturbed quiet. Palwan kept his promise even before the clip-clop of the horses' hoofs had died away in the intense darkness of the night as the *kurbashi* and his horsemen rode off to safer places.

Ahmad Palwan did not await the recovery or death of the effendi: afraid that the

kurbashi might return and take his friend away he soothed the wounded man with a blow from a heavy axe—soothed him for all eternity.

Thirty-seven days after the body of the effendi had been buried in a deep pit the *kurbashi*, who had learned of Palwan's act from one of the village bais, seized and bound Ahmad, and threw him across a saddle like a sack. Palwan was shaken up travelling this way on the horse for two days in order to make payment for the blood of the friend and faithful lieutenant of the *kurbashi*, the leader of the bandit gang, exactly forty days after the effendi's death.

Now he stood face to face with the enemy and awaited his word.

But the *kurbashi* did not speak because the tension he had had to work up to give full play to his avenging fury had exhausted all his strength. Defeated by sleep, he dropped his head on his breast and his snores reached the ears of the hunchbacked *ulem* and the yellow-faced *tabib* and the little bat-like old man.

As they sat on the dais the *ulem*, the *tabib* and the fidgety old man looked at each other in consternation but tried not to look at the executioner and the dismounted horsemen who were sick of this tiresome waiting.

And then the *ulem* mustered up courage

enough to give the *kurbashi* a shove. He shuddered, threw back his head, glanced at the sky and remembered that at sundown he had to lead his horsemen in a raid on the neighbouring village where some accounts with hostile peasants had been left unsettled too long. As the sun was already low and no more than two or three hours remained to sunset the *kurbashi* decided that it was time to put an end to that scoundrel. His single eye, gleaming like that of a wolf, was fixed on Palwan.

Palwan met his menacing gaze unflinchingly and did not lower his tired but very determined eyes.

Heaving his body violently forward the *kurbashi* shouted at the top of his voice.

"Filthy unbeliever! Do you imagine that life or maybe two lives stand behind your back and not the executioner?!"

Palwan twitched his swollen fingers behind his back and looked the *kurbashi* straight in the face.

"My prince!" he exclaimed. "I have said everything and there is nothing left for me to say. The effendi killed poor people, I killed him and now you are going to kill me. . . . But before my life is cut short I would like to do that which will find favour with Allah, that Allah may. . . ."

"You lousy fool!" screamed the *kurbashi*, "don't you dare take the holy name in vain!"

"How could I dream of blasphemy?" smiled Palwan, sadly. "No, prince, in my last hour I must think of other things. I humbly pray you, prince, permit me to do a deed that is pleasing to Allah and which will also be of advantage to you, o wise prince!"

"What advantage can I gain from you?" roared the *kurbashi* fiercely.

"My prince," said Palwan, "you are as strong as a lion and I am as weak as a bee. But do you not know that the lion almost perished when he ignored the bee? Do not disdain me, mighty prince, and I will reveal a secret to you."

The *kurbashi*'s face was distorted with a spasm of either wrath or laughter but he suppressed it and turned it into a yawn. The *kurbashi* showed himself unwilling to continue the conversation and snapped out in an angry voice:

"I can see right through you, dog!"

"You see me now with one eye but you could see me with two!" objected the Palwan firmly and, seeing the anger and perplexity in the *kurbashi*'s face, added slowly: "My prince, your left eye has been deprived of light because of the dark water that poured into it. But I can bring back the light of

your unseeing eye for I know the secret of healing the blind."

When he heard the word "healing" the Indian *tabib*, who did not properly understand the Uzbek language, suddenly became agitated and asked the *ulem* what the doomed man had said.

The *ulem*, sprinkling his Uzbek speech with the spice of Arabic words, explained the sense of what had been said and the *tabib* threw off his indifference and looked at Palwan with great attention.

"Of course, he's lying," he thought but immediately doubted his own doubts and asked himself sternly: "What if this man's big lie should contain a grain of truth?"

The *kurbashi* suddenly turned to the *tabib*.

"*Tabib*," he said, "I make you a gift of that lousy fellow's secret. You do not know much about the art of healing since you cannot drive out of your own body the disease that sets you shaking three times a week like the devil shakes a sinner. Take this secret of the healing of the blind and may it serve to make your art greater!"

The *kurbashi* roared with laughter and lay back on the cushions that the fidgety little master of the house had put there just in time. If it had not been for those cushions the *kurbashi* would probably have burst from

laughter, so violently did his enormous belly heave. The *kurbashi*'s sudden fit of merriment infected the others and even the stern-faced *ulem* could not restrain a smile while the little old man who looked like a bat was just one big laugh. The *tabib* alone did not take part in that unseemly mirth.

At last the *kurbashi* grew calm.

"I'm fed up with listening to the tales of that fool!" he said when he had regained his breath. "You talk to him, *tabib*!"

The *kurbashi* made himself comfortable on the cushions, wiped his perspiring face with a handkerchief and added with an evil leer:

"If it comes to that a cat doesn't immediately kill the mouse it has caught but plays with it first.... We can also play a little, can't we, *tabib*?"

The *tabib* nodded in answer and turned to Palwan.

"Have you ever succeeded in healing a single blind man?" he asked sternly.

"No," answered Ahmad Palwan, simply. "I have never healed anybody myself but my old teacher once gave light back to a blind man. The blind man saw and the old man became blind himself and died."

"What did he die of?"

"He died because he had given his light to the blind man."

Ahmad Palwan again twitched his numb fingers and added calmly:

"I shall go blind, too, when I give my light to the prince's blind eye."

The *tabib* pretended that he was not in the least surprised at this answer and then asked him still more sternly:

"What was your teacher's name?"

Palwan answered that he would name his teacher later when everybody had seen that he, Ahmad Palwan, was really able to effect a cure.

The *tabib* nodded his head again and was lost in thought. He was more filled with superstition than knowledge although he did know something of the doctor's art.

He thought that what Palwan had told him was impossible, monstrous even, but he recalled the admonitions he had heard long ago from his teachers who always maintained that in nature no line can be drawn between the possible and the impossible. Only a man as ignorant as that brainless *kurbashi* could make fun of a *tabib* who could not cure his own malaria. Even the greatest *hakims* bowed humbly before disease. But could that which was hidden from the initiated possibly be revealed to the uninitiated?

The *tabib* glanced at Palwan and made a

sudden decision: come what may he would not let the opportunity pass.

Speaking haltingly in a language that was strange to him he asked 'Palwan what drugs or herbs he would need to treat the *kurbashi*.

Palwan replied that he would need six blossoms of forget-me-not, two persimmon fruits, one egg, a spoonful of honey and a pinch of caraway seeds. The fidgety old man, a houseproud old bai, had everything that was wanted with the exception of the forget-me-nots and one of the horsemen was sent for them.

"Is there anything else you need?" asked the *tabib*.

"Yes," answered Palwan, "I shall need a copper kettle and a candle."

The old man brought these things and Palwan asked that the candle be stuck in such a position that it was opposite the *kurbashi's* blind eye; he ordered the kettle to be placed on the fire and two tea bowls of water poured into it.

All that was done.

When the water was boiling in the kettle Palwan asked the *tabib* to dissolve the honey in it, empty the egg into it and then drop in the persimmons and the caraways.

Palwan asked that the horseman sitting by the kettle stirring the brew be given the forget-

me-nots that the other had brought. When he had them Palwan ordered him to count six blossoms and drop them into the brew.

The *tabib* did not take his wary eyes off Palwan. He tried to remember the sequence of the operations but at the same time was torn by doubts.

"If only this man should prove to possess the secret!" he thought and thereupon began counting up the benefits that would accrue to him when the great secret became his property. Firstly, he would no longer need the patronage of the *kurbashi* and would be able to get rid of him without the aid of somebody else's dagger or bullet but by the swift aid of poison. Why, indeed, should he seek the grace of this merciless chieftain of a bandit gang when any city in India would consider itself fortunate to be able to throw open its gates to the possessor of such a great secret? Why, he would even be able to return to his native city whence he had been exiled as a charlatan and ignoramus through the dastardly intrigues of the other *tabibs*. What would all those infamous and envious *tabibs* say now, and what would the highly educated *hakims* say, and where would they hide their shameless eyes when they saw him return, mighty and famous, the greatest of the great *tabibs* that this world had ever known?

In this way or something like it the Indian *tabib*'s thoughts ran on as he gazed at the wisp of blue steam that rose above the kettle.

Palwan was also watching the kettle.

When the blue steam began to curl and then turn white Palwan ordered the men to remove the kettle and to bring stones that had never been touched by water.

"Bring the stones," ordered the *kurbashi* who had suddenly realized that before he undertook the raid on the neighbouring village he would have to excite his horsemen with a spectacle that he, their *kurbashi*, would culminate with an amusing but bloody trick.

Three of the horsemen brought stones in the skirts of their robes and piled them at the feet of Ahmad Palwan.

He asked to be shown each stone separately and at last selected a stone weighing seven or eight pounds.

"I am not sure that water has never touched that stone," he said and ordered them to shape it until it possessed the form of the iron share of a wooden plough.

"Do as he says!" ordered the *kurbashi* and a hefty young horseman got to work with a hammer such as are used to dress millstones.

Palwan then turned to the *tabib*.

"*Hakim*," he said, "I now need human blood!"

"Where can I get it?" asked the *tabib* in a worried voice and glanced at the *kurbashi*.

The latter stared intently at Palwan.

"I'll give you the blood!" said Palwan turning to the *kurbashi*. "Prince, order the executioner to lop off my finger," he added.

Smothered exclamations rolled across the huge courtyard and then died away.

The *kurbashi* ran his fingers through his curly beard and then, as though thinking aloud, said:

"In that case we shall have to untie your hands!"

"What! Are you afraid of me, prince?" asked Palwan and stared him boldly in the face.

The fingers gripped the beard and tugged at it, the *kurbashi's* cheeks flushed red and that made the pockmarks more prominent.

"Untie the pig!" shouted the *kurbashi*. "Untie that pig! Let two of my men stand with bared swords, one on either side of him! And you, executioner, unsheathe your sword and watch him closely!"

The three men with unsheathed swords surrounded Palwan, and the rope, cut with a knife, dropped to the ground. Palwan raised his arms and shook his hands over his head.

"Bring a block of wood and a small bowl!" he ordered, rubbing the weals on his wrists.

They brought the block and the bowl and Palwan told them by signs where to put them.

"Get ready, executioner!" he said softly. "When I shout 'Chop!' you must chop!"

The executioner muttered something inaudibly.

"*Hakim!*" Palwan called to the *tabib*. "Stand here and hold the bowl!"

The *tabib* came down from the dais, took the bowl and stood where he was told.

Palwan knelt down, folded to his palm four fingers of his left hand, leaving the little finger extended, and placed it on the block.

So intense was the silence throughout the house and courtyard of the fidgety old man that the fluttering of the wings of a passing butterfly could be clearly heard.

The hunchbacked *ulem* suddenly felt faint, he turned pale and covered his face with his hands. Most likely he did not hear the shout of "Chop!" or the whistle of the sword through the air.

When he opened his eyes Palwan had already straightened up to his full height and the *tabib* was sprinkling some powder on the wound to stop the bleeding. Palwan's face glistened with large drops of perspiration and he was breathing heavily and noisily.

The *ulem* saw with the corner of his eye that

the bowl was no longer empty but full of something and turned quickly away. At that very moment Palwan's half-closed eyelids quivered. He glanced at his hand and saw that the bleeding was getting less.

"Is the stone ready?" he asked.

"Is the stone ready?" repeated the *kurbashi*, like an echo, waved his hand and added impatiently, "Bring it here."

Up to that moment the *kurbashi* had not doubted that Palwan was making a fool of him in an attempt to avoid death but now he almost certainly believed that this incomprehensible man was capable of returning the sight of his blind eye. An indistinct feeling of pity, or, rather, the shadow of pity, flickered in the *kurbashi's* savage heart and there was less fury in his glance as he looked at Palwan.

Palwan continued to give instructions and his orders were obeyed as though they had been given by the *kurbashi* himself.

The giant horseman brought the stone already dressed in the form of a plough point and the *tabib*, following Palwan's instructions, smeared it with the brew from the kettle. The slow movement that gave the *tabib* an air of importance had been abandoned and he moved and worked with unusual alacrity as he now had no doubts about Palwan and believed that the great secret would be his, the *tabib's*,

who had grown weary of his difficult and dangerous service in the *kurbashi*'s bandit gang.

The *tabib* took the stone and went with it to a place open to the wind because Palwan had said that the stone must dry. It was just at this moment that the *tabib* remembered Palwan saying that the man who possessed the secret of healing the blind must lose his own sight in returning the sight of a blind man. The very thought of this so frightened the *tabib* that he stumbled and almost dropped the stone. But then another thought came to him: "I shall only heal the rich and then I shall be rich myself and shall have so much money that any beggar will be willing to go blind in my place. . . ."

This thought cheered him up and he put the stone in a place open to the wind and looked inquiringly at Palwan.

"I'll do everything else myself," said Ahmad Palwan and the *tabib* with the mien of a man who has performed an arduous task, climbed on to the dais. Palwan followed him with his eyes, lowered the mutilated hand that had by then stopped bleeding to the level of his shoulder and turned to the *kurbashi*. "If the prince will permit it," he said respectfully, "I will rest while the stone is drying!"

"Sit down, sit down!" the *kurbashi* hurried to say, and those surrounding him would

have heard kindness in his voice if only that hoarse bark had been able to take on a tender sound.

Palwan sat down on his heels between his three guardians and wearily bowed his head. If it were not for the mutilated hand lying on his knee, an onlooker might have thought of him as a peasant who had sat down for a brief respite after which he would again begin work in his garden or field. The incomprehensible calm of the doomed man astonished and, perhaps, even alarmed the *kurbashi*.

Until then he had believed that he knew the innermost recesses of the human soul. He had killed soldiers in battle and ploughmen in their fields, he had spilled blood on the sand of caravan routes and on the trampled ground of villages, he had robbed men and women of their lives, at times not even troubling to find out who was right and who was wrong—the *kurbashi* had killed thousands of people in this way. Hundreds of prisoners had stood before him in the same way as this elderly peasant now stood but he remembered very few of the many because but few of that many had dared curse and malign him before they died. If for no other reason Ahmad Palwan was incomprehensible because he did not curse and did not beg for mercy but argued rationally and respectfully.

When the *kurbashi* saw how calmly that incomprehensible man was enjoying his rest he ran over in his mind all the tortures that he knew but could not think of one that was likely to disturb Palwan's unusual tranquillity.

"If that unfeeling devil would consent to join my horsemen he would be as good as ten others!" thought the *kurbashi* and rage, mixed with admiration, ate at his heart, for he knew that one can break a stone but can't twist it.

Stroking his beard the *kurbashi* continued turning the heavy millstones of his thoughts in this way until the *ulem* leaned towards his shoulder.

"Time is passing, prince!" he whispered and the *kurbashi* shook himself like a dozing miller and shouted threateningly:

"Hi, you! Isn't it time you got on with it?"

"Yes, my prince!" answered Palwan, slowly raising his head. "The stone is probably dry. . . . Let them bring it here."

The giant horseman hurriedly carried out the order. Palwan took the stone from him and slowly felt the triangular pointed end of the stone.

"My prince!" he began, placing the stone at his feet. "Before I begin my treatment I should like to ask. . . ."

"That I should grant you your life?" the *kurbashi* said, interrupting him, and evil triumph made his one seeing eye gleam. "That is impossible, my jester! That is impossible because you have the blood of the effendi on your hands. . . ."

"You are right, my prince!" said Palwan, humbly, as though he admitted the truth of what the *kurbashi* said. "But tell me what the effendi had been before he became your right hand."

"He had been a true Muslim believer and the soldier of a Muslim ruler!" answered the *kurbashi*, importantly, even impressively.

"I had heard of that," admitted Palwan, simply. "But I also heard that after the ruler of that foreign land was driven out of his white palace on the seashore, the effendi did not wish to return to his native land."

The *kurbashi* nodded his head warily.

"That's how it was . . ." continued Palwan still in the same artless tones. "And so the effendi left his native land and remained in foreign parts, in our country, that is? Don't bother to answer, I'll tell you myself. . . . The effendi rode beside you, prince, and with you he set fire to our villages, killed and plundered. . . ."

From his low place Palwan looked up at the *kurbashi* and shouted rapidly:

"That's what I killed him for!"

"Dog! Filthy swine!" screamed the *kurbashi*, hoarsely, fumbling spasmodically for the hilt of his dagger.

"The cure! . . . You have forgotten the cure!" howled the *tabib* on his left while the *ulem* on his right added his voice, pointing to Palwan with his yellow hand and whining softly:

"Don't let him deceive you, prince! Can't you see, the scoundrel is seeking an easy death?!"

"You are right, my *ulem*. And you, too, *tabib*! . . ." growled the *kurbashi*, breathing heavily. "But let that dog take care how he plays with the knife! D'you hear me, villain?"

"I hear you, my prince!" replied Palwan with his former, perhaps with even greater, respect. "Forgive me, prince, but I only wanted to know whether your anger was still aflame."

"What do you want to know that for?" the *kurbashi* could not help asking.

"Because I am not so much afraid of your anger as I am of your kindness. . . ."

Again the *kurbashi* could not contain himself and asked in astonishment:

"I don't understand. . . ."

"You will understand soon!" objected Palwan. "I want to cure you, don't I? Then I have

reason to fear that when the spark of light illumines your darkened eye you may, out of gratitude, grant me my life."

"I see you are a misguided jester!" muttered the *kurbashi*, angrily.

"Wait a moment, prince, I haven't finished yet...."

"Speak up! But briefly."

"Good, my prince! Here is my mutilated hand and here are my eyes. When I have given you their light...."

"I understand!" said the *kurbashi*, interrupting him, "what next?"

"I do not wish you to grant me my life.... What is the life of a beggar who has to seek alms in the market place?"

"Your words sound wise enough," said the *kurbashi* and suddenly burst out laughing. "But what made you think I would grant you your life?"

Palwan, who had been sitting on his heels all this time, now stood up and stared into the *kurbashi*'s smiling face.

"I have my doubts, my prince!" he said.

"Oh no, you have no doubts!" said the *kurbashi* with malignant assurance. "You know that I shall kill you as soon as the treatment is over.... That is why you are not hurrying with your treatment, isn't it, my jester?"

"That is not so, my prince. I am ready to begin the treatment, but first I must be sure...."

"Of what?"

"That you will kill me...."

"Didn't I say...."

"I hear you, my prince...."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want to say a few words to your men."

"What for?"

"To make you angry."

"I'm angry already."

"I want you to be still more angry."

"And if I do not allow you to say foolish words to my men?"

Palwan smiled and answered with another question:

"Can you be afraid of my foolish words?"

The *kurbashi* turned red, nodded towards the guards and muttered, as though he were asking himself:

"And what if I were to tell my men to sharpen their swords on one foolish head?"

"And what if one dark eye were to remain for ever dark?" asked Palwan.

The *kurbashi* jumped up on his cushions and filled the courtyard with his roaring voice:

"Devil! Spew up your foul words as quickly as you can!"

"Good, my prince!" said Ahmad Palwan and with elusive rapidity changing his tone from one of audacity to humility he took a step back from the *kurbashi*.

"Don't talk to me, not to me!" howled the *kurbashi* and with a wave of his hand indicated the men who were watching what was going on with avid attention.

Palwan turned to the men who were sitting shoulder to shoulder on the ground and they saw his face as it was lit up by the slanting rays of the sun.

"People!" he exclaimed in a strong, clear voice. "You are looking at me and wondering. 'That fool,' you think, 'has given a finger and is now going to give up the light of his eyes to his worst enemy, the prince!' Don't be surprised at that, people, because I am giving up only a finger and my sight and you are giving up yourselves to be torn to pieces by the enemy. You are shooting yourselves when you kill your fathers and your brothers and burn down your own villages. Don't imagine that I have gone mad from fear! Let them scrape the flesh off my bones, let them grind my bones under a millstone, I am prepared for anything if only the truth of my words reaches your understanding. Within a quarter of an hour I shall be dead. . . . But before I die I want to know for

whose sake you gallop about the country with a rifle slung across your back and deal bloody wounds to your own brothers, to people as poor as yourselves. Tell me, people, for whose sake have you given up the honest farmer's plough for the dishonest British rifle?"

"Silence, hold your tongue, you scoundrell!" screamed the infuriated *kurbashi*, but Palwan did not even look at him and continued in a still louder and stronger voice:

"When our people have finished off all the counter-revolutionary bandit gangs, the rich men, the fat-bellied bais, will be scared to death.... But you, you who have nothing, what are you afraid of?"

The *kurbashi* was black with anger and he gave the executioner a sign to strike Palwan with the flat of his sword but not with the edge. The executioner blindly obeyed the order and Palwan staggered but managed to keep on his feet.

Then the *kurbashi* with a single movement of his shoulders shook off the hands of the *tabib* and the flabby paws of the *ulem*, walked to the edge of the dais and grunted straight into Palwan's face:

"I've been listening to your babbling long enough. Now you listen to me. You, jester, will not die from the blow of a sword as I had formerly planned but from a knife that is as

strong as a wild boar's fang. But before you die the *tabib* will carefully remove your skin and I will have it stretched on a drum and first you will hear how the drum rumbles under my blows and after that you will see the knife with which the executioner will cut your throat. I have spoken and there is nothing more to be said. You stop your barking and get on with your business! . . ."

Palwan bowed and made a sign that he be given the bowl. The sign was understood and Palwan wetted the stone with the contents of the bowl. The other signs he gave were not understood no matter how hard Palwan tried and the *kurbashi* cursed him and told him to explain in words what he wanted.

Palwan ordered the men to bring straw and twist it into wisps. Then he called the *tabib* and the owner of the house to him.

"You take a wisp, master and you, *hakim*, take the stone!" he said.

When that had been done he told the little old man to set fire to the wisp and hold it near the *kurbashi's* face.

"That may damage the prince's sound eye!" objected the old man.

"Then bind the sound eye with a handkerchief!" ordered Palwan and when that had been done he ordered the *tabib* and the old man to kneel down before the *kurbashi*.

"Now light the candle and see that it keeps burning and does not go out," he said.

They lit the candle and Palwan looked at the flickering flame.

"*Hakim*," he said turning to the *tabib*, "point the sharp end of the stone towards the blind eye and rock it like this."

Palwan showed him by signs what he had to do and the *tabib*, tossed the stone up a few times and then began to rock it to and fro.

"More smoothly, gently!" shouted Palwan. "Remember how a mother rocks her baby."

The *tabib* did not seem to have ever seen how a mother rocks her baby because Palwan kept shouting at him, "Gently, gently, smoothly..."

No matter how hard the *tabib* tried, Palwan kept shouting at him:

"Not that way, not like that, *hakim*! Begin again!"

In the meantime the little old man had set fire to the fourth wisp and the smoke from the burning straw was suffocating the *kurbashi* as he eagerly awaited the cure.

At last he could stand it no longer and, irritated by the clumsiness of the *tabib*, shouted angrily:

"Give him the stone, *tabib*! Let him do it himself the way he wants!"

The *ulem* again leaned over the shoulder of the *kurbashi* and whispered something in his ear. He was most likely warning his master that his action was lacking in caution because the *kurbashi* cursed him.

"What have I to fear from that abortion?!" he said, angrily. "What are the executioner and my two men with their swords there for? Let them draw nearer and bring him here!"

They led Palwan on to the dais and the swordsmen came up close to him.

Palwan fell on his knees before the *kurbashi* and said:

"My prince! So that your wise *ulem* should have no doubts let them bind my eyes, too."

"Bind them," said the *kurbashi*, coughing from the smoke.

"*Hakim*, give me the stone," said Palwan when his eyes had been bound.

The *tabib* pushed the stone into his outstretched hands and stepped aside, confused.

"Watch the candle, *hakim*!" said Palwan. "And make sure that the pointed end of the stone is always opposite the blind eye. I am beginning, my prince!"

...Slowly and smoothly Palwan rocked the stone back and forth; this swaying motion made the straw burn more fiercely so that the

smoke became thicker and thicker, hiding the heads of Ahmad Palwan and the *kurbashi*. The candle flame flickered and wavered behind the back of the healer; the *tabib* and all those present with him, watched the flame and at the same time kept an eye on Palwan's hands.

The movement of those hands was so accurate despite the fact that he was blindfolded that the pointed end of the stone was all the time directly opposite the blind eye. When the point went slightly off its mark the *tabib* did not have time to warn him for the healer immediately shouted: "Candle!" and for an instant everybody, the *tabib* included, looked at the candle.

It was precisely in this instant that the sharpened point of the stone smashed through the *kurbashi's* temple.

The next instant the executioner's sword whistled through the air and the dead Palwan fell on to the body of the dead *kurbashi*.

Before the executioner had time to wipe his sword he was killed by a bullet from one of the horsemen.

This first shot was followed by a second and a third: the followers of the dead *kurbashi* began killing one another in a furious battle that lasted until midnight.

At midnight the house belonging to the little old man who looked like a bat caught fire and a huge beacon rose into the air informing the neighbouring villages of the death of the *kurbashi* who had been known to very many people by the name of "The One-Eyed Tiger"!

SHIRIN COMES

by Aidyn

The old people lived on the banks of the wide Syr Darya, just there where the crags of Farhad, the mountain immortalized in Alisher Navai's poem, cast its reflection in the emerald-green waters.

The whole family lived in the same house but the old people had a separate room where bright-red roses bloomed under the window and the shadow of a silver poplar tree fell. They lived like old people in fairy-tales live—enjoying the care and attention of their children and surrounded by the grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Much water was carried by the Syr Darya. Many springs did the old people live together happily although at times sorrow visited their home.

The old man called his wife *kampyr* which means "old lady" and she called him by the

name of their eldest son, Sher Ali, out of her respect for him as head of the house, for his grey hair and for his wisdom, for such is the ancient custom of the Uzbek people. The neighbours all respected the old man and called him Sharif-ata, Father Sharif.

The old woman had lived many long years with her husband, as many years as there are stars in the blue sky, and she loved him as Shirin had loved Farhad but still she was not always patient and respectful to the old man. That's how it was that February night. . . .

The wind howled outside their courtyard wall and big flakes of wet snow were falling.

The sounds of somebody playing on a *karnai*, the six-foot-long signal trumpet, woke the old woman. She opened her eyes and listened.

"What does it mean to dream of a *karnai*?" she muttered.

But the plaintive, monotonous notes of the *karnai* became louder as it grew nearer and nearer, it entered the room and resounded at the head of the bed. The old woman could not stand it any longer and sat up in bed grunting and groaning in the way old people do. Now she could plainly hear the music as the wind carried it through the village. It was accompanied by some strange rustlings, voices and girlish laughter. Suddenly the old

woman felt as though the bed under her had jumped up and then gone back to its place again. A heavy roar reached her ears, like the rolling of thunder or Mount Farhad collapsing.

"*Touba!*" she shouted in fright, seizing the arm of the old man who was sleeping beside her. "Get up! Shake your sleepy self! What is happening outside? I don't know whether I'm dreaming or whether Farhad has collapsed into the river. All my life I don't remember such a noise."

The old man opened his eyes, listened, rolled over to make himself more comfortable and muttered in indifferent tones:

"Go to sleep, *kampyr!* If the *karnai* and the *surnai* are playing it must be for a wedding."

"We've had our wedding, may fate send that same good fortune to the youngsters. But why are you so sleepy that even an earthquake couldn't move you from your bed? Open your eyes and tell me what has happened."

"Oh, *kampyr, kampyr!* Why don't you go to sleep? Anybody would think we're on a camel's back instead of in a nice soft bed. Shirin has arrived and is crossing the river. And thousands of fine young men are following her leading by the bridles their iron horses and flesh and blood camels laden with untold

wealth. If you go to the foot of the mountain at sunrise you will see the huge camp that Shirin has pitched. And your eyes will be dazzled by the bright colours, by the tents and by the yurtas of the Kazakhs," drawled the old man in the tones in which he would have told a tale to send a little child to sleep.

"Oh, if I had only died before I was born! What are you telling me fairy-tales for, old man?" said the old woman, angrily interrupting her husband.

The old man did not pay any attention to his wife's anger but continued his tale.

"And beautiful Shirin came and said: 'If you, Farhad, still love me, arise and show me your strength and your wisdom. Stem the waters here with iron gates so that the Syr Darya shall rise as high as the highest poplar. When you stem the old river with iron gates and send a new river flowing across the plain I will become your wife.'"

"Oh, *touba!*" exclaimed the old woman, quite at the end of her patience. "Shirin was always a sensible girl, even in the tales. Why is this Shirin of whom you speak so silly, just like a baby? Why should she want to raise the water and then shut it up behind iron gates?"

"*Kampyr, kampyr!* If I tell you that you're a foolish child yourself, you'll be angry. But only little children keep asking 'Why?' and

'What for?' without waiting for the end of the tale."

"If you've turned me into a foolish child it's because you're a babe in arms yourself. You even dribble when you're talking," added the old woman, hinting at his toothless condition.

"If you don't want to listen to me, listen to the *karnai*, perhaps you'll understand the music better," answered the old man gruffly, angered by her hints.

"Don't lose your temper, Sher Ali, you know many things, but I who live in darkness also want to see a little light."

The old man forgot his anger and continued:

"Water will flow from the big river into the Shirinsai. And that water will make clever machines work and a power will appear that will give light. And that light, like the fame of Shirin, will flow along wires and factories will work to produce such weapons that the enemy who learns to know them on the field of battle will remain in the earth there for all time."

"*Tovba!* What's going on? I sit here knowing nothing and listening to your tales like an old fool," drawled his wife, unbelievably.

"There are tales that come true, *kampyr*. Yesterday I went down to the riverbank and

saw it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears. There are more people on the riverbank than there are flowers on the plains."

"You went and saw everything and said nothing to me," muttered the old woman in an offended voice, "as though I weren't your wife but a neighbour you'd been quarrelling with."

"Who am I telling it to? A neighbour?" asked the old man with a laugh.

"Who's doing all that? Are Uzbeks doing it?"

"Yes, the Party and the people of Uzbekistan. Uzbeks, Russians, Tajiks, Kazakhs, everybody who lives in our country."

"I want to see everything for myself," said the old woman and began to crawl out of bed with a groan.

"Wait a bit, *kampyr*! It's snowing outside and it's muddy and slippery, so wait till morning and we'll go together," said the old man, holding back his wife.

The old woman did not sleep all night long, she lay listening to the howling of the wind and got up early in the morning: she threw her grandson's quilted robe over her head and filled the big sleeve with dried apricots and raisins as though it were a bag. With the help of a stick she made for the door.

"Good day," said the old man ironically as his wife was leaving.

"In the night the *karnai* sang, calling me to the feast. And 'so I'm going; you told me yourself that Shirin had come to Farhad."

"Couldn't you wait? Look how muddy it is," said the old man, again trying to persuade his wife not to go.

"Let God clear it away, it will be easier for me to walk."

"Why must you go? Are you going to break stones, too?" continued the old man, mockingly.

"How funny you are, Sher Ali! It will be a help if I wish people that they may not tire at their hard work. I don't want to sit still, all swollen like bread that has fallen into the water, when people have been working with all their might since dawn." Without listening to any more of her husband's objections the old woman set out down the street leaning heavily on her stick.

The old man followed her with his eyes, smiled and followed slowly after her, his hands folded behind his back.

The golden rays of the rising sun were reflected in the water as they broke through the smoky haze that spread over the valley. The feather grass of the steppe swayed in the wind

as though it were reaching out for the sunshine. An extraordinary picture met the eyes of the old people.

Along the riverbank marking flags shone brightly like red tulips. Banners with inscriptions on them fluttered in the breeze: "If you are Farhad, show your strength!" "If you call yourself the son of a lion—be one!"

They could hear shouts of encouragement of those at work mixed with the laughter of the girls and with merry songs.

The old woman walked along the riverbank watching everything that was going on. Now and again she stopped, gazed round her in astonishment and muttered:

"If only nothing goes wrong! May past misfortunes remain in the past!"

The old woman was troubled. She had brought a few dried apricots and raisins with her but did not know to whom she could give her modest gift. And the old woman wanted to pay tribute to the best of the best. But to whom? To the stone dressers or the navvies? To those who were boiling water for tea at dawn and late at night were still busy cooking pilau? To the cart drivers or the lorry drivers? To the shoemaker or the engineer?

She took hold of the sleeve trying the weight of the fruit.

"I've brought very little," she muttered ruefully, "there's not enough for everybody and if I give it to one the other will take offence."

She went to where her husband was standing, fumbled in the pockets of his coat and was still more worried when she found nothing there.

"What are you worrying about, *kampyr*? Give it to anybody," he said, trying to soothe his wife. "Do you think they really need your dried fruits when they have sugar?"

"Oh, how funny you are, Sher Ali! They are all like my own children to me. My apricots will be sweeter than sugar to them. Haven't I brought them what I had..."

"Salam, Sherif-ata, salam, *ona*,"* shouted unexpected voices of greeting.

In the heat of their argument they had not noticed that young people had surrounded them.

"*Ona*, give me your fruits and I'll distribute them so that nobody is left out," said a young man, holding out his hands.

The old woman tipped the apricots and raisins out of the sleeve into the young man's outstretched hands.

* Mother.

“Share them out, my son, so that my heart should not be pained.”

Again the *karnais* rang out. The builders on the Farhad Construction Scheme left their work and streamed towards the canteen. They sang and joked as they walked along, taking with them the old people for whom life had become a legend and legend an actual fact.

NEW YEAR'S PARTY

by Rahmat Faizi

Old Aunt Bahri finished cutting the thinly rolled dough into circles, wiped the board and rolling-pin and put away the leather square on which dough was kneaded.

"Aren't you tired, auntie? You've been working hard!" said Halimakhan who was making the circles into tiny patties.

"How can anybody get tired from that, girlie? That sort of work comes as easy to me as cracking nuts does to a squirrel."

As though to prove the truth of her words she got up from her seat with a light and easy movement.

"It's a pity you didn't bring your mother-in-law to us, Halima. We could have had a good gossip together."

"She didn't want to come. She was afraid that her grandson would wake up while she

was away. Are you afraid you'll be bored with us?" asked Halima with a smile.

"Old women understand each other better, girlie, that's something you don't know yet. Everybody will be here soon, you'll all sit down to table, the bottles will be opened and the fun will begin. At first somebody will stand up and say: 'To the health of comrade grandmother!' and will raise his glass." Aunt Bahri imitated a man pronouncing a toast.

Halima laughed at her.

"Then somebody else will say: 'Long live our grandmother!' and will also raise a glass. After that you lose count of the number of glasses. Then you'll take your husbands round like this"—Aunt Bahri made voluptuous eyes, raised her brows and held out her arms as though she was putting them round somebody's shoulders—"and away you'll go dancing. Will you worry about me then? I'll sit in a corner alone and watch you."

Aunt Bahri enacted the scene with such artistry that Halima was rolling with laughter.

Naima rattled the dishes as she laid the table in the next room but even there she heard the laughter of her friend and the jokes of her mother.

"The show's beginning!" she called out from there in friendly tones.

"And it's good fun, Naima!" answered Halima. "Tell me, auntie, if your husband were alive would you dance as well? Would you?"

"That's all I need! Dancing, indeed! But still it's a great pity you didn't bring your mother-in-law! She's a fine woman, simple and kind. And the thing that happened to her once—it was a long time ago, the year I abandoned the veil. I remember it as if it were yesterday—at my cousin's wedding, it was." Aunt Bahri suddenly burst out laughing.

"I know how you abandoned the veil," said Halima and again her eyes flashed saucily. "They say that you left the house and walked down the street as far as the cooperative in your veil and then took it off unnoticed and wrapped it in a shawl."

Aunt Bahri's face clouded. Why bring up an old story that many people had already forgotten? Why touch an old wound? And how much talk there had been at the time, both in the cooperative and throughout that part of the town! Yes, it was true that she had only removed the veil at the door of the cooperative, had tried to get it past without being seen and had hidden it somewhere in the workshop or had left it with friends who lived near by. There were some people who knew this but the majority did not suspect anything. She had kept it up for almost a

year. Once, at a meeting in the workshop, somebody had said:

"There are those amongst us who only pretend to have abandoned the veil."

It was as though somebody had poured a bucket of cold water over Aunt Bahri. Luckily her name had not been mentioned but that very same evening she announced sharply to her husband:

"It will be better if I don't work at all but sit at home and wear the veil instead of pretending that I've abandoned it."

Zakir did not immediately answer his wife. He was thinking that Uzbek women workers had recently appeared at the factory where he had worked for ten years. But it was also true that some of the old men who sat from morning to night outside the mosque grumbled all the time and spread gossip and scandal: "The wife of so-and-so has taken off the veil"; "So-and-so's daughter-in-law is behaving improperly, talks to men and shakes hands with them"; all this talk upset him. Aunt Bahri, however, did not wait for her husband to answer.

"All right," she said angrily. "I'll go to the women's commission and tell them all about it. And you'll only have yourself to blame!"

She stood up with such determination that it seemed she would go there immediately.

From that time on Aunt Bahri got rid of that accursed veil. She simply tore it up, stuffed it with old rags, quilted it and made a cover for the brazier out of it.

Whenever anybody mentioned the veil Aunt Bahri recalled that incident and could not contain herself. She always imagined that people were reproaching her: "Is it possible that you, the wife of a highly-respected skilled worker, the mother of Doctor Zakirov, you who have been granted a pension for twenty-five years' work could have worn a veil?"

Aunt Bahri could scarcely retain herself and almost said something rude to her daughter's friend.

"All that is over and done with. . . . You're the only one, it seems, who hasn't criticized me yet." With a youthful motion of her hands she straightened her hair and kerchief.

"Oh, auntie, would I dare criticize you? I just happened to remember. . . . But please tell me what happened at that wedding."

Aunt Bahri, however, continued making patties in silence, and Halima spoke to her in a tender, imploring voice.

"Auntie, dear, won't you tell me the story?"

It is easy to offend old people with an unwary word but it is as easy to please them with gentle words. Aunt Bahri's face lit up as Halima spoke.

“Well, we went to that wedding, the bride hadn’t arrived, and we had only just sat down when the courtyard was filled with shouts. ‘What can have happened?’ we wondered. The bridegroom’s mother, my uncle’s wife, was standing in the middle of the courtyard. She had taken somebody’s bundle of wedding presents and hurled it across the ditch. A tray flew to one side, dried berries poured on to the ground and beside it lay a piece of very ordinary material. The bridegroom’s mother was tearing her hair and howling: ‘I’ve put everything I had into my son’s wedding and that woman brings me her lousy berries and rotten homespun! She wants to disgrace me before the whole world! Is that what I invited her for?’ No matter how we tried to calm my aunt, no matter how much we kept telling her that it was improper, the bride would soon arrive, it was all in vain: she trembled as though she were in a fever and seemed ready to tear up everybody in her wrath. I went up to her and said: ‘Calm down, now, come inside.’ But do you think she would? ‘The presents I’ve given her and what does she bring me? That’s her gratitude!’ screamed my aunt. ‘That’s how cheap she thinks I am!’ I could see that she was not to be soothed. Then I looked at the things she had thrown away and noticed a familiar shawl

with a fringe. The gifts were those that had been brought by my friend Aipasha, your mother-in-law."

As she told the story Aunt Bahri laughed until she cried. At first Halima laughed, too, but then she was silent: what a disgrace! And it happened to her mother-in-law!

"Aunt Bahri, was your uncle's wife such a greedy woman?"

"I'll say she was! She begrudged you a piece of ice on a frosty day. And a terrible scandalmonger. It's twenty-five years since that happened but I still remember her screams."

"What relation was she to my mother-in-law?"

"The sister-in-law of her aunt. You'd better not tell your mother-in-law about it, she'll be angry with me for telling you."

"Surely my mother-in-law wasn't mean, was she?"

"Of course not. Aipasha wasn't really a bit like that. Rather simple, that's all."

"After that she didn't go to weddings for a long time, she was ashamed to." Aunt Bahri stopped. "Of course the whole trouble was caused by our ridiculous old customs: 'Take it, old girl—return it, old girl!'"

The doorbell rang twice in quick succession and Aunt Bahri hurried to wipe her hands.

"Naima, open the door, it must be them."

While Naima was letting the visitors in the telephone rang in the room.

"I told you so," exclaimed Aunt Bahri, "I said they'd all come at once." She took up the telephone receiver. "No, boy, what are we going to do with those I've made? They'll go bad . . . we don't need anything, you come along quickly, it's nine o'clock already."

A young woman entered the room leading a plump little boy of about five by the hand. They were followed by a middle-aged man.

"Come in, come in, my dear Sanaubarkhan! How are you? How are you keeping? Give me your coat," said Bahri, kissing the little boy. "I'm awfully glad to see you, my dear Vakhijan. Why are you so late? And what's that?" she exclaimed at the sight of a big bundle the visitors held out to her. "Why do you drag such heavy things about?"

"Just a little present, auntie. I've only seen Naimakhan once since her son was born and today I want to congratulate her properly. Please take it."

While she was talking Sanaubar bound her plaits round her head as though she intended helping the women with the work in the house.

"Where's Aghzam?" asked Vakhijan, trying to change the topic of conversation.

"He's out somewhere. He just rang up and asked whether he should bring home some fro-

zen patties. I asked him what he thought I had been making my own for? Come, Batyrjan, you can go into the nursery and play with the children there."

Other guests arrived and were greeted by Vakhijan. In the absence of the host he, as a friend of the house, gave the new arrivals a place at the table and went into the next room, where the women were still busy at their patties, to bring tea. Vakhijan was surprised that his wife had suddenly grown silent and was sitting apart and that the other women had stopped talking when he came in. It is true that he heard one phrase dropped by Naima as he entered the room: "When are you going to stop that, Mamma? Can't you manage without pinpricks?"

"They have some sort of a quarrel going on, I'd better not interfere," thought Vakhijan and pretended that he had not noticed anything.

"Aunt Bahri, give the guests some tea," he asked. "What a lot of work those patties make! You must be awfully tired. . . ."

Bahri answered him mockingly:

"Why don't the factories that make refrigerators and vacuum cleaners turn out a machine for making patties?"

Vakhijan laughed. But his was the only laugh—everybody else remained silent: Nai-

ma and Halima did not join him and Sanau-bar, her face red, sat with her head lowered twisting a button on her blue jumper. Vakhijan took the teapot from Naima's hand and opened the door to leave.

"Vakhijan, bring Batyr here," said Sanau-bar to him.

Vakhijan looked at his wife in astonishment. Naima made him a sign to go out and then asked excitedly:

"What's the matter with you?"

"To tell the truth," began Halima, when the door closed behind Vakhijan, "auntie is right. Whenever I listen to her I realize that we did not elect her to the district Soviet for nothing. How much longer are we going to stick to our old customs and carry trays of dried fruits and cakes every time we visit somebody? It doesn't become us!"

Vakhijan came back to the room and Sanau-bar jumped to her feet.

"Bring Batyr here," she said sharply to her husband, "I'm going."

Naima had by this time finished her work on the patties and went over to her friend. She was angry with her mother for her caustic remarks but she was still more angry at stubborn and touchy Sanaubar. She had come up against these traits in her character at school and at the technical college where they had

studied together. Sanaubar could take offence and feel insulted for a long time over some quite inoffensive word. She remembered the business with the *beshtik*, the old-fashioned cradle in which Sanaubar wanted to put her first child. Vakhijan bought a nice little bed and Sanaubar threw it out and no matter how much Naima tried to persuade her to use it she would not listen. What is more, on the advice of her old mother, she decided to have a *beshtiktoi* or cradle-festival on the day the baby was first placed in it. At this point Naima took up the cudgels seriously. She brought all her friends to Sanaubar and one of them, a doctor, told her of the harm the *beshtik* could do. In the end the *beshtiktoi* was abandoned and a simple evening party in honour of the newborn was given. Then Sanaubar herself fought against the *beshtik*. When the next child was born the question did not even arise. But now she was being stubborn again. . . .

Naima would have liked to say a few caustic words on the subject but she refrained, for Sanaubar was, after all, her guest. She took her friend by the arm and said:

"Sanaubar, Vakhijan, come on, let us join the others."

Sanaubar, however, insisted on having her own way.

"No, I won't. Where's Batyr?"

Vakhijan's face darkened. He did not look at his wife but turned to Aunt Bahri.

"Will you please tell me what the matter is?"

"The matter is that I've upset your wife a bit. There was nothing insulting in my words except for somebody who doesn't understand. You are educated young people. You're an engineer, Sanaubar has also been educated even if she doesn't work now. And you go out in your car with a big bundle in your hands. And where are you going? To a party at Engineer Aghzam Azizov's. It's a good thing that bundle couldn't be seen inside the car. She might even have carried it on her head, on top of her hat!"

Vakhijan wanted very much to laugh: he had argued with his wife about the same thing before they had set out but Sanaubar had issued an ultimatum: without gifts she would not go. He would have liked to tell them about the argument but seeing that his wife was already upset decided to give her his support.

"Auntie, she wanted to celebrate the birth of your grandson."

"And so I was mistaken in you? It seems you're also. . . ."

"No, no," laughed Vakhijan in protest. "I'm not like that, but. . . ."

"But what?"

"All right, auntie, we're wrong. And so we don't have to give presents?" asked Vakhijan smiling innocently.

"I didn't say you mustn't give presents at all. Sanaubar has brought a lot of presents. She's a generous woman."

Aunt Bahri began counting the presents off on her fingers.

"Shirts, shoes—good. A length of silk, well, what about that?" Aunt Bahri stammered a little. "To tell the truth. . . . I should have been shy of saying it before, I thought she would take offence, but now I think it's better to be honest: that length of silk has been brought here with the idea of getting another in return. Naima will have to show her gratitude to Sanaubar with a gift of the same value. And if she tries to avoid doing so. . . ."

Everybody laughed. Sanaubar lowered her eyes. Halima was afraid that Aunt Bahri would again tell the story of her mother-in-law. Vakhijan tried to get everybody into a good mood, asking provocatively:

"What will happen if she doesn't?"

"Then she'll be in for it! Don't you know the proverb: 'Go, my tray, return, my tray, and if you don't return may the devil take you!' Just as you came in I was going to tell Halima a tale of the old days when we used to give

presents. I took a piece of grey material that looked like satin. The host gave me something in return for it. I would have forgotten all about that piece of material . . . but no, how could I forget it. I had intended making a dress for myself from it. . . .”

Everybody, even Sanaubar, laughed again.

“Yes, you think it’s funny. But I’m telling the truth, why should I hide it. Nine years later there was some sort of festival at our house. My cousin brought me a piece of material very much like that one. I remember thinking that it was exactly like mine as I put it in the trunk. Later on when I took it out I was really surprised to see that it was the very same piece of material: I recognized it by a little green stain on it. Nine years had passed! Well, I thought, it won’t do for a dress any more, perhaps I can make a quilt from it. I spread out the material and saw that it had perished at the folds and tore as soon as I touched it. And so I tore it up for rags. Later I learned that that piece of material had travelled round from wedding to wedding and had been in seventeen families in the course of nine years. Ever since then I’ve turned a cold shoulder on the custom: Take it, old girl, return it, old girl!”

“Good old auntie! Your eloquence can break down any wall,” exclaimed Vakhijan.

"And now about today's business. Sanaubar brought a piece of silk for a dress. That's all right but why bring a sack full of cakes? And the ingredients for pilau: meat, butter, rice and even carrots. She didn't even forget the salt. And then there are the fruits and the sweets. Whether you like it or not I'm against all that."

"All right, auntie, all right! We'll take the ingredients for the pilau back again. Don't worry, Sanaubar, we'll have pilau left for ourselves."

"Oh, no, I'm not giving it back," exclaimed Aunt Bahri, laughing. "And I'm not talking about today's case only. Drop that foolish custom, children, it isn't fitting for you."

There was a ring at the door. Naima opened it and came back with three telegrams. She handed them to her mother who passed them on to Vakhijan.

"Read them. You see it wasn't for nothing that my eye twitched. . . ."

"Two for you, auntie, one from your son Takhir and his wife Kimyakhon in Moscow and the other from the district Soviet. The third is for Naima and Aghzam."

Nobody noticed that Aghzam had come into the room. He laid the packages from his shopping on the table and turned to his wife:

"There are some other things left in the car, bring them in, please."

Aghzam greeted Sanaubar before anybody else. "What are you going to do now? Are you going to stay?" was the question that could be read in Aunt Bahri's eyes. Both she and Vakhijan looked intently at Sanaubar and saw that she was smiling happily.

... At twelve o'clock Matluba lit the candles on the New Year's tree. Raising their glasses they wished each other a happy new year. Aunt Bahri was even in tears. As she had foreseen, all raised their glasses to the health of "comrade grandmother." Then they moved the table and chairs back to the walls, started up the radiogram and the dances began.

Aunt Bahri, her eyes gleaming from the glass of champagne she had drunk, said to Halima:

"You see, it's a pity you didn't bring your mother-in-law, we could have had a good talk."

THE FIRST STEP

by S. Zunnunova

Twilight fell. Rano and I were busy in one of the rooms on the third floor of the university.

For some time Rano had been absent-minded, pondering over something. She had been trying to avoid meeting Rustam Jan, a student of her year, and, when she had been unable to avoid him, had turned her back on him.

Rano closed her book and went over to the window without a word to me. I went and stood beside her, the soft, pure air carried by a spring breeze blew lightly in our faces. The moon shone down between the tall, graceful trees. Electric lights sparkled like stars among the trees in the garden below and the city, too, gleamed with electric lights. The motor horns, the music that wafted over from afar, the laughter of people sauntering

in the gardens reminded one of the tales of countries with ever-green gardens and eternally young people.

Rano leaned on the window-sill and stared into the distance. Suddenly her eyelashes quivered.

"They say that Rustam Jan is getting married," she said in a suppressed voice and wiped away the tears that were rolling down her cheeks. "Lucky girl," she added with a sigh.

I did not answer, it is difficult at such moments to find words of consolation.

For a long time Rano had been in love with Rustam Jan, a youth of medium height with thick black eyebrows that joined in the middle. He was a student in our study group, a good organizer, took part in all activities, was on the Komsomol and trade-union committees and was well liked; he was also respected by the teaching staff. The strange thing was that Rustam Jan, who organized dances, never danced with girls but always with boys; he never did his preparation for seminars with the girls. When the whole group worked together he asked questions of the boys only. If he met one of the girls he never gave her his hand and confined himself to scarcely audible words of greeting.

I lived in the same city quarter as Rustam

Jan and knew his family—his mother and sister, an old maid. The mother was a garrulous old woman who could, at any moment, pour out a ton of gossip to anybody she was talking to. The women of the quarter spoke of the sister as a coarse and cunning scandalmonger. Rustam Jan's family lived in isolation and he was seldom at home himself—he spent most of his time in the university.

We never noticed that Rustam Jan had shown signs of being in love with any girl. He knew that Rano loved him but was quite indifferent to her. All our group knew it, too.

"I live in the same quarter but I haven't heard anything about a wedding. Who told you?"

Rano already had control of herself. She took me by the hand and looked into my eyes.

"It can't be helped," she said, "the heart won't obey you and love doesn't come to order." She turned to the window again. "If I could see her just once. . . . She must be a wonderful girl. . . ."

"All right, I'll try to find out."

"Of course, you live near them, try to find out, please," she begged me.

On our day off, when I knew that Rustam Jan was not at home, I went to his house. His

mother was sitting on the verandah stitching a quilt and his sister was sweeping the courtyard. When she saw me she threw down the broom unwillingly and came slowly over to greet me. The old woman took off her glasses and stood up.

"Come in, girlie, how are you?" she asked, patting me on the shoulder.

"Thank you. And how are you?"

The old woman pushed the quilt aside with a determined gesture. Her daughter invited me to sit down.

"I see you are in a hurry. Isn't there going to be a wedding soon?" I asked, glancing at the silken quilt she was making.

"Yes, dearie, I want to marry off my son while I'm still alive."

"Who's the bride? Where is she studying?" I asked.

"She isn't studying. She used to work at the cooperative with me and now she embroiders caps at home," answered Rustam Jan's sister as she spread a cloth.

"My dear son is clever," chirped the old woman, accepting tea from her daughter. "He does not go against my will. What should I do if he were like the good-for-nothing louts there are about today and wanted to marry his own choice? Educated girls don't stay at home and I want a worker, a helper. She can

earn just as much at home. She embroiders beautifully. She is as graceful as a poplar. I chose her myself! Rustam Jan let me have my own way. He's not interested in educated girls and says he doesn't like women to teach men. He's just like me!"

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I took a sip of boiling hot tea and almost scalded my mouth. The two women did not notice it, however.

"Although the bride hasn't been to school she's not one whit worse than those who have," boasted the old woman. "And what a trousseau she's got ready! Even two silk tapestries!"

I stood up without answering.

"Did you want to see Rustam Jan?" asked the old woman, gathering the crumbs from her skirt. "He'll probably be home in the evening."

"Yes, I wanted a book," I answered.

Next day I told Rano everything. At first she would not believe me and stared at me with wide-open, startled eyes; then she lowered her head and covered her face with her hands. She sat like that for several moments and, as I looked at Rano, I thought that those moments were enough to extinguish in her heart a love that had tormented her for a whole year.

Some time later Rustam Jan was married. He invited all our girls to the wedding but none of us went. How could we be friends with a man who insulted human dignity?

The summer vacation passed and the academic year began again. Perhaps it was because we were in our last year that our friendship became stronger—we had been sitting side by side for five whole years. Those had been years rich in impressions! How could we ever forget the times we did our preparatory reading sitting on a blanket spread on the green grass? Or the dances that began spontaneously in the hall of our hostel? Or the excitement and alarms that preceded examinations?

Rano did not speak of Rustam Jan any more and I did not ask her anything. Why irritate old wounds? Rustam Jan's smooth and precise answers to the teachers and his courteousness in his relations with his comrades did not please us as they used to. The year before he had headed the Komsomol organization of our group but at this year's elections he had not even been nominated.

That year our group arranged many evening parties. The boys always came with their girls and the girls brought boys with them but Rustam Jan always came alone. At last we could stand it no longer and on the eve of

the New Year's party told him that if he did not bring his wife to the party he need not come at all.

"It's about time we met your wife!" said Kumri, half jokingly.

Rustam Jan blinked trying to find an answer.

"She'd come, but... it's like this... she wouldn't want to," he stammered with a wry smile that was an acknowledgement that he was lying.

"You say strange things, Rustam Jan," said Muzaffar with a wave of his hand. "Your wife stays at home and you have a good time, go to New Year parties, to the pictures or the theatre. There's love for you! Doesn't your wife want to go to the pictures? You say one thing but you do another, is that it!?"

Rustam Jan turned pale but did not answer.

We decided to have our New Year party at Huri's. Rano and I had undertaken to help Aunt Fatima, Huri's mother and went to their house in the morning.

Rano was rolling dough for pies, her body swaying slightly as she worked. Strands of hair fell on to her face and disturbed her and she brushed them away with the back of her hand. She worked in silence and it seemed to me that her thoughts were far away. Rustam Jan's wife was coming that evening. Perhaps

Rano was thinking about that. Could she still be in love with him?

The guests began to arrive at ten o'clock in the evening.

"Rustam Jan has come!" exclaimed Huri who was looking out of the window and ran out of the room.

Rustam Jan came in and following him was a tall young woman with a light complexion; this was Nuri, Rustam Jan's wife.

Rustam Jan did not introduce his wife to us. He greeted each of us in turn and then went and sat down beside Muzaffar. We introduced ourselves to Nuri. I invited her to sit down beside me. She sat down timidly and for a long time did not take part in the girls' conversation. Rustam Jan behaved as though he had come alone and did not pay the slightest attention to Nuri. Rano suddenly stopped talking. When the others laughed out loud only the slightest smile appeared on her thoughtful face.

"Do you go to work?" I asked Nuri in an effort to draw her into the conversation.

"No. I used to. But after I was betrothed my husband's relatives wouldn't allow it. Now I embroider caps a little."

"Isn't it boring at home? Come and see us. Come to the university, there are plenty of girls there. Get to know them. We often have

parties like this. Rustam Jan comes and you don't. Come along and don't be shy!"

Nuri's cheeks were flaming. She seemed to want to say something and looked at me hesitatingly.

"Well, you know . . . you're all studying and I . . . what am I? Like should go with like, they say. . . . I suppose an uneducated person shouldn't marry an educated one. Of course, I'm bored at home but I . . . I'm not your equal," she said softly, fidgeting with the fringe on the tablecloth.

"Who said so?" exclaimed Rano taking Nuri by the hand.

Nuri did not answer immediately. She looked sideways at Rano and smiled in confusion.

"I ask my husband to take me with him but he says that I'm a housewife and that I have nothing to talk to you about. When I think about what he says it seems to me that he's right."

Rano looked at Nuri in astonishment and with the deepest pity. In the meantime the party was growing merrier. Dance music was being broadcast. Muzaffar and Huri were dancing and the other guests were standing in a circle clapping their hands. Nobody had heard our conversation.

Rano went out of the room. A long time passed and she did not come back in so I

went after her. She was standing leaning against one of the verandah posts. It was snowing and big snowdrops settled and melted on the fur collar of the coat she had thrown over her shoulders.

"Rano, come inside. You must be frozen!"

She turned to me.

"Poor Nuri. . . ." She stopped as though she had a lump in her throat that prevented her from speaking.

I could not hold my tongue any longer.

"It seems that the girl you thought was lucky isn't so very lucky, after all."

Rano did not answer. Then she looked me straight in the eyes.

"We can't let Nuri go on like that," she said decisively. "She's still very young. Can't we free her? We can do it, can't we? We must! Nuri is an excellent embroiderer, she must go to work. All our group must take part in settling this question. I'm going to fight against Rustam Jan openly, now. There is no love left in my heart. The only thing is that I pity Nuri."

"Of course, we can't leave things as they are. Before long Rustam Jan will be leaving the university. You're right, we'll get the whole group on to it," I answered.

We returned to the room. Rano's eyes were beaming with happiness as though she had

found the answer to a riddle that had been puzzling her for a long time. She pushed her way into the centre of the circle and, snapping her fingers, broke into a jolly dance. We all admired her light and graceful movements and the tender coquettish expression in her eyes. Rano stopped in front of Nuri, inviting her to dance. Nuri rose and blushed a deep red, and we all clapped our hands. She looked round the circle and then sat down, hiding her face in her hands. But Rano caught her by the hands and pulled her to her feet. Nuri glanced sideways at her husband. Rustam Jan sat with his eyes down-cast.

"Are you afraid of your husband?" asked Rano, half jokingly. "Let him say so much as a word and we'll deal with him. We're friends, now, so dance and don't be afraid!"

We continued clapping. Nuri looked at her husband again but still she could not catch his eye. Suddenly she became serious, gave a determined look at Rano who was clapping her hands encouragingly and then tripped lightly round the circle.

Nuri had taken the first, decisive step towards a bright and happy life.

THE AUTHORS

Aibek (Musa Tashmuhammedov), one of Uzbekistan's prominent writers, was born in Tashkent in 1905.

He started his literary career as a poet and has written collections of poems, the best known of which are: *The Flute of the Heart*, *The Torch*, *Bakhtigul and Sagindyk* and *Vengeance*.

His first novel, *Sacred Blood*, published in 1940, is about the response of the popular masses to the revolutionary movement in tsarist Turkestan.

Aibek's second major novel, *Navai*, which is centred around the personality of Alisher Navai, the great Uzbek poet and humanist of the 15th century, was acclaimed by readers.

This was followed by *The Wind of the Golden Valley*, a novel about Uzbek cotton-growers, *In Search of Light*, a narrative about the life and struggle of progressive intellectuals in Pakistan, and a number of other works.

Aibek has translated Russian and West-European classics into the Uzbek. These include Pushkin, Lermontov, Gorky and Heine.

Aibek is a member of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences and a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the

U.S.S.R. and of the Uzbek S.S.R. For his great services in literature he has been decorated with the Order of Lenin, the Order of the Red Banner of Labour and the Order of the Badge of Honour

Abdullah Kahhar, born in Kokand in 1907, began to write in the mid-twenties and became one of the founders of modern Uzbek prose. A writer of short stories, novels and plays, his works combine subtle humour with lyricism and show a profound knowledge of the people they describe.

Two of his books, written after the war, are especially popular. They are *The Lights of Koshchinar*, a novel tracing the establishment of collective farming in Uzbekistan, and *The Silk Suzane*,* a comedy about the development of new land, which has had successful runs on the stages of many theatres.

For his services in literature he has been decorated with two Orders of the Red Banner of Labour, the Order of the Badge of Honour and the Scroll of Honour of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek Republic.

Askad Mukhtar, born in Ferghana in 1920, began as a poet. His first poem, *Our Forbears*, which is about Bukhara's past, was published when he was still a student. Subsequently, he turned to modern themes.

Sisters is one of the most interesting Uzbek novels of the postwar period. In vivid, true-to-life descriptions, Askad Mukhtar recaptures scenes of the fight to industrialize Uzbekistan, of the shaping of the Uzbek working class, of the emancipation of women and of the fraternal assistance that the Russian people

* A wall hanging.

rendered in the implementation of these far-reaching undertakings.

Askad Mukhtar is active in the literary and public life of the Uzbek Republic. He is the secretary of the Union of Writers of Uzbekistan.

Aidyn (1906-1953), whose real name is Manzura Sabirova, was born in Tashkent. She became a teacher after finishing a Teacher's College and began to write in the twenties.

Most of her works are about Uzbek women for whom Soviet power has opened wide the doors to knowledge and public life.

During the war, Aidyn wrote about Soviet women who took the place of the men fighting the enemy.

After the war, she published two volumes of stories—*Shirin Comes* and *Courage*—about foremost people in Uzbek industry and agriculture.

Aidyn was active in her Republic's public and literary life. She was a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek S.S.R.

An engineer by profession, Rahmat Faizi, born in Tashkent in 1918, began his literary career in 1944 with the publication of features about the people of Uzbekistan's socialist industry.

In a feature entitled *Road to Perfection*, he drew the personality of Bashorat Mirbabayeva, the first Uzbek woman engine-driver in Süz.

In 1951, he published a narrative, *Spring Has Come to the Desert*, about Komsomols who came to develop a barren steppe.

Rahmat Faizi is the editor of the newspaper *Kultura Uzbekistana*.

Sa'ida Zunnunova was born in Andizhan in 1926. She became a teacher after finishing school and wrote for a Young Pioneer newspaper.

In 1952, she graduated from a university.

Beginning her literary career as a poetess, Sa'ida Zunnunova was also successful as a writer of prose; her stories exposing survivals of the past in people's minds and castigating backward ideas of the role of women in the family and in society drew widespread attention. Recently, Sa'ida Zunnunova published a narrative, *The New Director*, in which she shows an Uzbek woman as an executive.

TO THE READER

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